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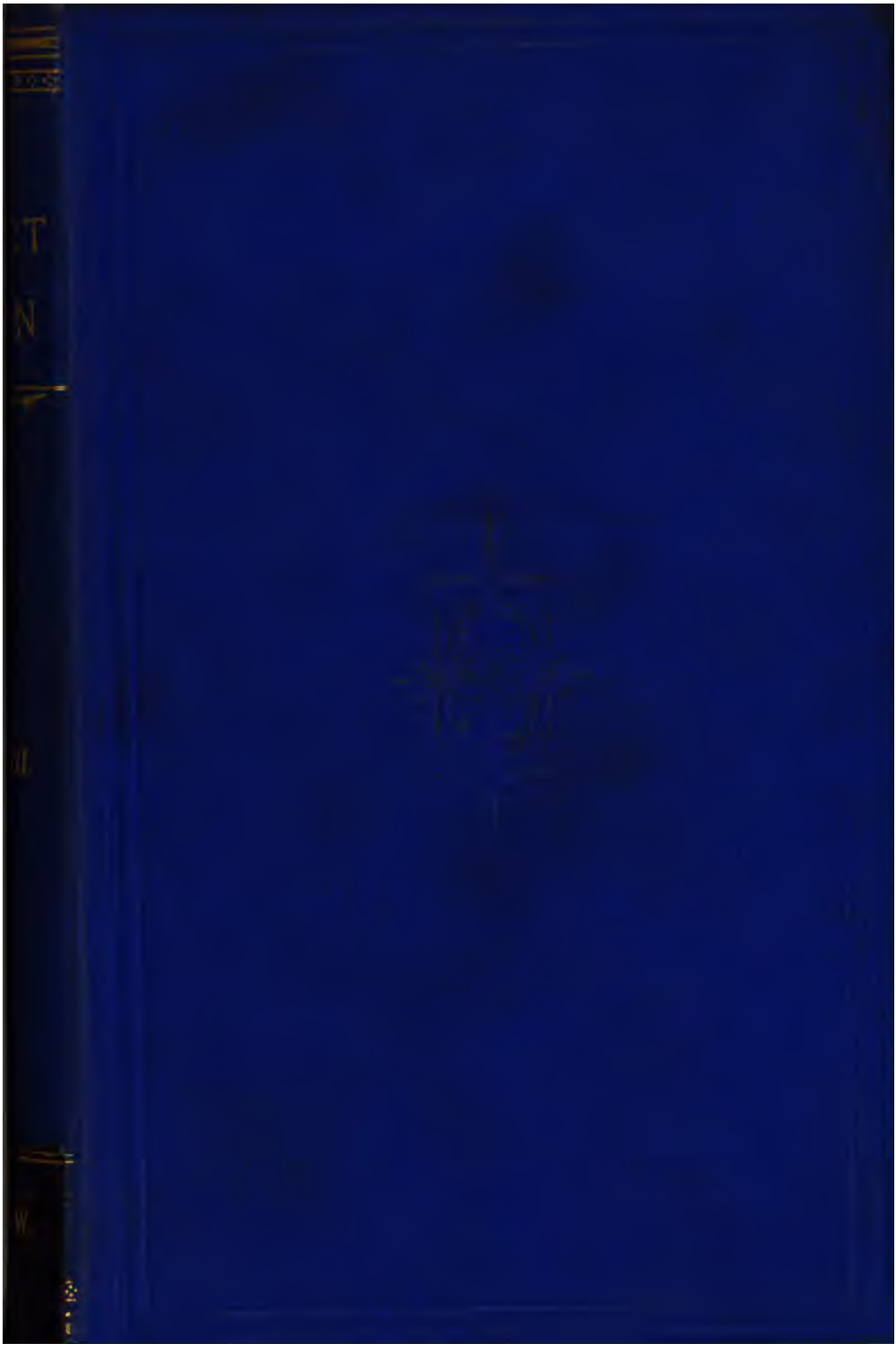

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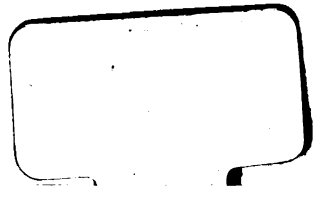

# MY INSECT QUEEN.

## A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR

OF

"MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT."

"As, rising on her purple wing,
The Insect Queen of Eastern Spring,
O'er emerald meadows of Kashmeer,
Invites the young pursuer near,
And leads him on from flower to flower,
A weary chase, and wasted hour,—
So Beauty lures the full-grown child."

THE GIAOUR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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# MY ASSISTANT.

## CHAPTER I.

### "ANY HOPE?"

"The dawn is not distant,
Nor is the night starless,
Love is eternal!"

LONGFELLOW.

MARIAN HOLLYS was yet in the prime of early womanhood—she looked scarcely as old as her brother, to whom she bore but a slight resemblance. Her figure, so far as it could be discerned beneath her silken coverlet, was slight and fragile; her hands, white as ivory, and slender as a child's, hung hopelessly beside her, for she had been stricken by paralysis through all her frame,

and was unable to move her arms without assistance. Yet in her face a superficial observer would have looked in vain for the usual impress of wearing sickness. He would not have detected the flush of fever in the brilliant carnation of her cheek, nor its glitter in the restless flash of her bright, dark eyes, whose sparkling animation contrasted so strangely with the immobility of the outstretched form.

But to an experienced glance, no languor or quietude would have had the menace of that factitious animation. The white Death had aimed his shafts from the citadel of the brain, and struck the muscles powerless, and there he still held battle with the resisting force of youthful vitality, over which his final triumph was sure, though it might be long protracted.

She greeted me cheerfully, even gaily, in a clear, sweet voice, and with dimpling smiles, which must have been very charming

when they were seconded by the expressive grace of lively gesture, though now they were only piteous. I won her without difficulty, to speak unreservedly of her state and symptoms, but I learned little more than I had already gathered from Roland's account of them, and that little had no encouragement in it. When she had ended, she looked at me wistfully, enquiringly.

"Tell me the truth, Dr. Crofton—I am not afraid—shall I ever recover, or is this sickness unto death?"

"Unto death? no, no, no. A young woman like you has power to keep that foe at bay for some time yet."

"But shall I recover? and when?"

"The when I cannot say—these diseases are obstinate—we must have patience."

"Patience? ah, well, I don't know that patience is quite one of my virtues as yet. I am impatient enough sometimes, when I am in actual pain; and do you know,

Doctor, I feel it so hard, that while this weak frame is powerless to act, or to enjoy, it should still retain so keen a sensibility to suffering."

"My darling," said her husband, tenderly, and he bent over her so kindly, that I thought perhaps her womanly instinct had not guided her wrongly when she chose him, in spite of his yellow hair and pale eyes, "My darling, we hope that this very sensibility to suffering is the witness of a force that will one day overcome, and survive it. May we not hope this, Dr. Crofton?"

Her eyes smiled at him, and turned again to me.

"One thing at least I may say, I am not a gloomy invalid; I can hope always; I can even enjoy, sometimes; I have so many alleviations. What a blessing that I have not to suffer poverty and privation! When my poor brother lost all his fortune,

he might have risked mine and Roland's as well. I might have been forced to languish in some wretched hovel, with nothing but hideous, sordid surroundings; that would have been worse to me than pain, and the pain itself would have been worse, a thousand times, for I am so spoiled by indulgence and luxury, and the sense of beauty is life to me. I can still take pleasure in my pretty room, and my sweet garden, and in my children's rosy faces and gay dresses, although Fanny's screams sometimes drive me nearly wild; but what if I had to lie all day staring at bare walls, in some dark, dirty street, and see my girls ill-dressed and half famished, *that* would be dreadful! though," she added, with a merry laugh, "I am afraid this content has its root in the love of the world, against which Harry has to preach every Sunday."

During this speech, Mr. Hollys had several times glanced at me, with an ex-

pression half enquiring, half deprecating, as if warning me against the betrayal of some confidence, although he scarcely knew to what extent I had been entrusted with it. His look, however, with its doubtful significance, seemed to cast a dim light on a subject in which I felt some curiosity, and I responded to it by the smallest possible nod, which was intended to say: "I know all about it—the secret is between us two —I will keep it from *her*," though in fact I could not remotely guess what the secret could be. Marian resumed:

"We will talk no more about myself, Dr. Crofton, tell me about dear Roland: is he well? is he happy? is he liked at Cleobury? He has written so often and so affectionately of you, that I can not look upon you as a *new* friend, and yet you are not a bit like what I fancied you, from his description."

"No? did he give too flattering a description of me, Mrs. Hollys?"

"Not that, exactly, not that at all; but I expected to see you more lively, more of a '*joli garçon,*'" she added, laughing; "but then, it is true, you have your professional air on, just now, and are, perhaps, graver than usual."

"And you, Mrs. Hollys, are unlike what I should have expected to find Wentworth's sister; but the difference is in a contrary direction, you are more playful, more vivacious; and, to cap your French phrase, more '*espiègle*' than I should have looked for, in so near a relative of my Knight of the Dismal Countenance."

"Dismal, do you call him?" she asked, eagerly. "Ah—you smile, you are only jesting. Still, Roland was always more serious than I am. But he was light-hearted and playful, too,—was he not,

Harry? — until that great sorrow came, which dispersed us so sadly."

"My love!" interposed Mr. Hollys, "that is three years ago—you cannot think that your brother, with the anxieties of his work, and his riper manhood, can still retain the light-heartedness of boyhood, even had he not been, as you admit, of a serious nature."

"But 'dismal'? Harry. Dr. Crofton called him 'dismal.' He was cheerful enough when he was down here—before he went to Cleobury. He has not many anxieties, has he? Perhaps he has launched into too expensive a style of living in his new partnership; young practitioners make that mistake occasionally, and Roland is so generous and open-handed."

I could not repress a smile at this remark. My Assistant's expensive style of living in my humble bachelor home, struck me as something comical, and again the

Curate's warning look was a kind of revelation.

"Do you think," continued the lady abruptly, "that my brother is in love?"

I laughed outright at this, and so did Hollys, but *his* laugh was rather dreary.

"Indeed, my dear madam, your brother is too reserved to confide in *me*, on such a delicate subject; he may be less so to *you*. I should say, however, that he is too busy for love-making."

Marian heaved a little sigh of disappointment.

"I had hoped—that pretty Miss Graysbrooke—the pretty heiress—you know, Doctor—I *did* think that Roland was a little touched there."

I pricked up my ears at this, not quite joyfully.

"Has Wentworth given you any reason for thinking that Miss Graysbrooke—?"

"Oh, no; it is his silence about her that

makes me suspicious; he described her to me in his first letters, but lately he has never named her, and that gave me hopes—"

"And why *hopes*, Mrs. Hollys? since you do not even know if the young lady is worthy of his choice, or would respond to it?"

To which Marian evasively rejoined—

"What sort of a girl is she, Doctor?"

And I as evasively repeated—

"Why '*hopes*,' Mrs. Hollys?"

The clergyman laughed.

"What a well-matched pair you are," he said, "for discretion. Each of you shows the other that there is something to hide. But I will tell you why my wife 'hopes,' Doctor. You said Roland looked dismal; —woman-like, she fancies a young man can have but one cause for melancholy, and she looks to this heiress of yours to console him for his first disappointment."

"Do you mean—" I said suggestively, and looked at Marian as if half afraid I was indiscreet. She fell into the trap, of course.

"Miss Gilroyd," she said; "yes—that *horrid* girl!"

"My dear!" murmured her husband, chidingly.

"But she *was* a horrid girl, Harry!—I never saw her, I am happy to say, but I used to hear of her—one of those 'fast' girls, riding and romping, and doing all sorts of unfeminine things."

The idea of the stately Rosamond as a romp, was even more comical than that of the severe Roland as a Sybarite. I did not feel myself called upon to defend my bride "*in posse*," from such a charge, but I was curious to know what grounds the impetuous, impulsive Marian had for making it.

"I should scarcely have thought, Mrs.

Hollys, that Wentworth would have admired any lady to whom such a description could apply. You never saw Miss Gilroyd, you say; have you not mistaken some one else for her?"

"No, I never saw her. I was only once at Wallingrove after the Gilroyds came into the neighbourhood, and she was not at home at the time; but there is no mistake —she used to flourish about on a spirited horse, with those odious Densleys; and she broke off her friendship with my brother—if such women are capable of any friendship—because he remonstrated with her. Colonel Densley, like the wretch he was, found it out, and boasted of it—a married man, too!"

"Marian, Marian!" cried her husband; "do not cast such reflections on a poor girl, who deserves pity now at least, in her changed fortunes."

But when does a woman show pity when

a sister-woman is her foe? Mrs. Hollys abated nothing of her vehemence.

"I cast no reflections, Harry; nothing, at least, of the kind you mean. So, Dr. Crofton, you need not look so grave. I only meant to say, that she was one of those fast girls who mistake notoriety for admiration, and the world's sneer for its smile."

I thought it time now to break a lance for my "Dark Ladye."

"We must not forget, Mrs. Hollys, that the world's smile in sunshine, is apt, in shadow, to turn into a sneer. I am sure that Wentworth would as little assent to these harsh strictures on Miss Gilroyd now, as at any period of his acquaintance with her."

"You think he has not forgotten her?" asked Marian, uneasily.

"Forgotten her? No—" (aside, "It would be difficult, when he sees her once

or twice a week,")—"but—yes—in the sense you mean, I think he has forgotten her. I do not think Miss Gilroyd will ever be your sister-in-law."

"That assurance is quite unnecessary," replied the invalid, haughtily; "my brother would certainly never take a wife from a family disgraced by a fraudulent bankruptcy."

"Pshaw!" cried I, peevishly—"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Hollys; but really you are unjust to this poor young lady. How can her uncle's bankruptcy disgrace *her?* She was not a partner in the concern, I believe?"

"If she had no part in the robbery, she shared the spoil. You cannot wonder at my bitterness against these people when you remember how much my family has suffered at their hands."

"Do you know what has become of the girl?" asked Mr. Hollys, innocently;

but I was seized with sudden deafness.

"You have been talking too much, and too warmly, Mrs. Hollys; you must have rest and quiet. I will say good-night."

"Shall we see you to-morrow, Dr. Crofton?"

"No, I am off to-night by the mail train; if your husband will walk back with me to my hotel, I will leave with him the few directions I can add for your treatment to those you have been in the habit of following by your brother's advice. As for his marriage—why we will not think of that until you are well enough to dance at it."

"Then, Dr. Crofton, I am afraid he will die an old bachelor—like you," she laughed.

But my answering laugh was hollow. An "old bachelor," indeed! how recklessly women do hurl about such epithets.

My companion walked beside me for

some time in silence when we had left the house; and then came the question—so sad a one for a physician to answer in such a case—

"Doctor, have you any hope to give me of my poor wife's recovery—be it ever so remote?"

Alas! I had none. There was not, to my mind, the shadow of a chance that she would ever more arise from that bed of helpless suffering. Surrounded as she was with every loving tendance, gifted as she seemed to be with great elasticity of nervous temperament and vital energy, she might linger there for months—nay, even for long years yet; and this hope—if hope it could be called—was the best I had to offer. He heard the verdict calmly—I do not think he had expected any other—and there was again a pause, which he broke abruptly—

"Dr. Crofton, you must think me mean

and selfish to a degree that would disgrace the lowest pauper in my parish! I almost incline to think you are justified in such an opinion of me."

"And I, Mr. Hollys, know of no cause for such a judgment."

"No cause?" he cried, excitedly, stopping short in his walk—"no cause? when you see me, a wretched hireling of the Church, toiling for lower wages than our Bishop may give his butler, yet living in such comfort and luxury as can only be purchased by an income thrice the value of mine!"

"Well, my dear fellow, however you manage it, while your comforts and luxuries are duly paid for, I don't see that any one can blame you for enjoying them."

"Paid for?—yes, you know they are paid for, and you know by whom!" (I didn't, but I could guess, and I waited for clearer information on the point). "*You*

know, though my poor Marian does not, that she is maintained by her brother's charity—that he has concealed the loss of her fortune from her by the surrender of his own; and with it his chances of worldly advancement — his prospects of domestic happiness. How you must despise me for accepting such a sacrifice!"

"My friend, why should I despise you for following the world's example, and taking all you can get?"

He continued, regardless of my remark—

"But it is not for myself; I could bear poverty alone. I did not marry Marian for her money—indeed, Dr. Crofton, I did not! I loved her, and should have loved her, had she been penniless—though, in that case, I should not have been able to marry her. Still, I was wrong—utterly wrong; any man is wrong to wed a woman whom he has not the means of supporting, indepen-

dently of what she may possess. I have been severely punished."

Well, so he had, poor fellow; but the punishment had its mitigation. It is not every man to whom the loss of his wife's fortune is compensated by the generosity of a brother-in-law. However, I kept that remark to myself, merely observing—

"It is a puzzle to me how you could have concealed from Mrs. Hollys what she owes to her brother's kindness."

"That was not so very difficult. Roland has told you that Marian had been seriously ill, and was still weak in the earliest stage of convalescence, when the tidings came of her elder brother's ruin. Neither of us then knew that the whole of her money had been invested by him shortly before in Gilroyd and Westerman's bank, but the shock, coming on her at such a time, brought on the inflammation of the brain, which passed away, leaving her as you see

her. Of course it was—and is—of the utmost importance that every cause of annoyance or anxiety should be kept from her; but how could this be done on an income of a hundred a year, with the expense of such attendance as her situation requires, added to that of the education of our children, and the luxuries to which she has always been accustomed? And then Roland urged upon me his right to guard his only sister from a trial under which she must have sunk, pleading that he was young and strong—able to work, and free from any nearer claims upon him; and so —mean and sordid as you must think me— I yielded."

"I see no meanness at all,—as you say, Wentworth has no nearer claims—he is able, and, by Jove! willing enough, too, to work for ten sisters."

And having yielded, the secresy he imposed on me was a necessity, for Marian

would never have accepted such a sacrifice. And so she is ignorant to this day that it is her brother's fortune, and not her own, that surrounds her with the comforts and indulgencies that are indispensable to her in her present state, and to the luxuries and delicacies that are almost equally so to her—spoiled and petted as she has always been —that it is at Roland's cost that our children are clothed and educated, and that to do all this he is enduring privations—!"

Here I interposed; "No, no, Mr. Hollys, you are mistaken there; Wentworth has no privations to undergo—he is very comfortable with me, I assure you, and not overworked either. My practice is not so extensive as that, and if he has his full share of my work, he has an equal share in my enjoyments. Roland Wentworth is a good fellow, a very fine fellow—you may well be grateful to him and proud of

him, but he is not an object of great commiseration as my Assistant, I assure you!"

"Forgive me, Dr. Crofton, I did not mean—"

"Enough said—no offence meant nor taken; here we are at my hotel, will you come in, and finish the evening? the train will not start for two hours yet.—No.—You are anxious to return to your wife—all right—keep up her spirits as well as you can; remember, they are *her life*, and to do this successfully you must keep up your own. Wentworth will make his way in the world, and none the less that he has other interests at stake than his own. He is one of those people on whom the sweets of existence would soon cloy without the bitter flavour of self-denial. I can't say that is a seasoning much to *my* taste! And as for you, why, you'll get a fat rectory one day, and be able to repay your obliga-

tions to him—so far as money can repay them."

And the incredulous smile on the poor Curate's mournful countenance was the last I saw of him for that time.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE "INSECT QUEEN."

"THE horn of the hunter was heard on the hill," as I walked across the meadows that skirted the woods, on the breezy March morning, when I descended from the railway carriage, and wended my way homewards from Lingford.

Hark! the blast of the horn rings close by, and lo, the scarlet coats of the huntsmen, glancing and flashing among the brushwood on the hill-side, and the pied coats of the hounds sweeping past in close phalanx, eager, excited, and in full cry, for

yonder pants the unhappy little beast they are making such frantic exertions to overtake, cantering, in full view, across the lea, —his heavy gait, his drooping brush, telling that his race is nearly over.

Talk of an Englishman's love of fair play, indeed! with all those dogs, and horses, and men in pursuit of that poor little atom of a creature, to which they have denied all the chances of escape its instincts afforded it, by stopping up every hole into which it could creep for refuge. I can understand the pleasure of hunting a thing—but where is the pleasure of *killing* it when it is not good to eat?

It has gained the coppice, however—it has disappeared on the other side—the hounds disappear after it; and now the meadow is alive with furious riders, some in pink, some in black, for it has been a good meet this morning, and a short burst.

Ha! there's a habit!—and, yes—surely, there's another! Miss Comberhill—and by Jove! Miss Gilroyd!—A moment, and Sir Charles dashes past me, never casting so much as a glance in my direction, and close behind him follows Rosamond, on his favourite mare, Freya. I had to stand back, under the shelter of the river-cliff, to avoid their spurning hoofs.

Rosamond looked splendid. She sat the high-mettled Freya like an angel—no, I don't mean that—"an angel on horseback" is an equivocal compliment, I know—like an amazon then—but amazons did not use side-saddles—anyhow, she looked splendid! Her becoming riding dress displayed her magnificent form to the fullest advantage. The dark coils of her shining hair were bound closely round her head, her cheek was flushed with excitement and exercise, her brilliant eyes were actually blazing! She managed her horse with perfect ease

and self-possession, not a fold of her habit disordered, not a braid of her rich tresses in disarray. Her beauty was overpowering; it broke on me as something new and surprising, as if I had never beheld it before. She swept past me, as Sir Charles had done, but not regardlessly like him. She flashed on me a glance of smiling greeting; she waved a delicate, gauntletted hand. All the landscape brightened with her loveliness—I wonder the very fox himself didn't stop to look at her!

There was a stiff fence between the meadow and the coppice, the Baronet took it in gallant style and vanished back into the woodland; Rosamond's mare rose to it without a check, and over she went "like a bird!"—"A bird?" a butterfly rather, "the Insect Queen of Eastern Spring" —then she, too, vanished. All the rest followed—some of them going round to open a gate—and then I was left alone,

with my beating heart and my carpet bag.

Guy Crofton, I think you are done for at last, my boy, that "stunning" apparition has dealt you the *coup-de-grâce.* Pensively I pursued my homeward path; but when it diverged to that leading to Rosebank I paused, and after a moment's hesitation, turned off in that direction. Perhaps I was eager to see Mrs. Hartopp again? "*je ne dis pas non.*" Even gossips and scandal-mongers have, like other noxious creatures, their use in the scheme of creation, and Mrs. Gaby was sure to be well "posted up" in anything that might have been going on during my absence from Cleobury.

I felt inclined for a little chat just then; Wentworth would be abroad visiting his patients, Sir Charles I had seen in the "happy hunting-grounds," ah! *how* happy they were, blessed with Rosamond's fair

presence in them! Besides I must see that my bailiff has understood my written directions, *not* to cut down the silver birches she praised so.

The Reverend Gabriel was out. Since the birth of his blessed baby, he had been allowed—or had taken—more freedom to come and go, than he had formerly enjoyed. But Mrs. Hartopp was at home, and welcomed me with such warmth, that I was almost afraid she meditated an embrace. Happily she stopped short of that.

"Oh, you old darling!" (confound her impudence) "how glad I am to see you back. What a time you have stayed away! I have missed you so."

"You have? you have changed your note, Mrs. Hartopp, it is not so very long since you seemed to think you had a very good substitute for me, in my Assistant."

"You are so jealous, Dr. Guy," returned the lady with what she meant for a pretty pout, "of course Mr. Wentworth is very well, but how can a man of his age understand babies, as you do, who have attended successive generations of them?"

"Not so many as that—however, I hope yours has not suffered from Wentworth's comparative inexperience?"

"No, he is very well just now; I wish you could see him, but Miss Barham has just taken him out with nurse, for his first drive in the sunshine. By the way, I suppose you have just arrived by the train from Brakesfield, or Lingford? I saw a carpet-bag in your hand as you came up the walk. Let me be the first to congratulate you on the termination of your chancery suit—now, *really*, I suppose we may look for changes at Rosebank?"

"Are you prepared to give up posses-

sion? I couldn't find in my heart to turn a lady out, you know."

"Oh, your gallantry will not be put to the test! Dr. Barham is coming home in three months, and will take his own duty; so darling Gaby and I must make way for the new reign at Rosebank, before the *coronation* day, Dr. Guy."

"And so Barham is coming back, is he? any other news, Mrs. Hartopp? I have been away nearly three weeks from Cleobury, and feel as strange after my long absence as Rip-van-Winkle did after his sleep—for I have not heard a word from home all that time."

"No? how odd! did not Mr. Wentworth write to you—or Miss Barham?"

"No one could write to me, I did not leave my address. I did not care to be bothered with letter-writing while I was amusing myself, and if you receive letters you must write some; so

now tell me, what has been going on since I left?"

"All sorts of improper things have been going on."

"Bless my soul! don't frighten me, Mrs. Hartopp."

"First of all, that unconscionable little flirt, Monica Graysbrooke, has broken off her engagement with Sir Charles Cotgrave."

"That is nothing new; she has done it before—she is always doing it—in fact, it is a habit of hers; she means nothing by it."

"But it is a final rupture this time; the old Major is as savage as a bear, and no wonder. Miss Monica is not such a wonderful catch, that he can hope to see her 'my lady' when she has flung away her only chance."

"And what does Sir Charles say?"

"Oh, he takes it coolly enough; he

seems very well able to console himself,"—and here Mrs. Hartopp perpetrated something like a wink,—"but Lady Janet is furious."

"Indeed! it would seem then that she has not so low an opinion as you have of Miss Graysbrooke's eligibility as a 'catch.'"

"Not at all; she is just anxious to get her son-in-law respectably married, before he makes a fool of himself—or a knave, for he's fool enough already. Blind as Lady Janet is, she knows pretty well what is going on around her."

"Do you know this from her Ladyship herself?" I inquired, a little maliciously.

"Not I, indeed!" answered my companion, scornfully, "I never go near the old cat; but I have it from the best authority that Lady Janet is very much displeased at Miss Graysbrooke's behaviour

—in fact, the Major told me so himself."

"That, I admit, is good authority; did the Major tell you what reason Monica assigned for breaking off her engagement?"

"I don't think she gave any—a little giddy creature, no one expects her to give a reason for any caprice of hers."

I felt relieved; my mind had misgiven me on hearing that Monica had reclaimed her freedom, as I remembered the conversation I had held with her in the drawing-room at Heath Hill. Girls are so impulsive—what if my folly had led the poor little thing to snap the last link of her already fretted chain? I should have more firmly repelled her innocent advances. Poor, sweet, guileless little Monica! But Mrs. Hartopp's answer re-assured me—

"And is she cheerful—in good spirits?"

"In good spirits enough to attempt fresh

conquests — the way she runs after Mr. Wentworth is perfectly disgusting!"

"Oh! come, Mrs. Gabriel!"

"You don't believe me?—just ask Miss Gilroyd—ask Gaby—ask anyone with eyes in their heads! why all Cleobury is talking about it—she is 'making eyes' at him quite openly, just as she did at that poor young Temple. We shall hear of another attempted suicide by-and-bye—only this time, perhaps, it will be more than attempted. You laugh, Dr. Guy; it is no laughing matter, I assure you. Monica Graysbrooke is a little *vampire* — that's what she is!"

"Why, Mrs. Hartopp, you are as bitter against my poor little pet as if she were your rival. She has not been 'making eyes' at Mr. Hartopp, has she?"

"I should think not; she wouldn't waste her time where she would lose her pains. It is quite different with Mr. Wentworth—

with him, poor fellow, of course her fortune is a powerful attraction."

"Do you mean to say that Mr. Wentworth is Monica's lover?" I asked, with an uneasy recollection of Mrs. Hollys' observation on this point.

"Perhaps not exactly—she may not have caught him yet—but she is sure to do it. Men are so easily won by flattery; and when she *has* caught him, I ask you, what will she do with him?" inquired Mrs. Hartopp, defiantly.

"Why, what could she do with him but marry him?"

"Much you know of Miss Graysbrooke! *she* would never subscribe to the doctrine, 'All for love, and the world well lost.' She will play with him as a cat does with a mouse, and then let him go, and seek some fresh prey for her insatiable vanity."

"Even in that case I should have no fear

that Roland would either poison or shoot himself; but if little Miss Graysbrooke's harmless coquetries are the worst you can tell me of, Cleobury has not grown quite demoralized since I left it."

"I don't know what you would call worse, unless it is Miss Gilroyd's goings on."

"What! — are *her* doings improper, too?"

"If the way she behaves to Sir Charles is not improper, I don't know what is. Do you approve of a 'humble companion'—a mere servant—riding to hounds with her mistress's son, dressed like any lady in Rotten Row—and on his best horses, too! when she ought to be waiting on Lady Janet?"

"If her mistress, as you call her, sanctions the young lady's conduct, I do not see that we have any right to censure it."

"Oh, Lady Janet—what can she do? she is only at Heath Hill as a guest, you know; and then Miss Danvers toadies her so, that she does not miss the other girl's attendance so much."

I had had enough now, and I rose to take leave—

"Oh, do stop, Doctor. I have told you all the '*on-dees*' of the place—you owe me a little confidence in return; do tell me, will it 'come off' soon?"

"You are too enigmatical for my plain wits, madam," I answered, making for the door.

"You sly thing! but she is the flower of the flock—I will say that, Doctor—you have made a wise choice. I am so glad that now you are rich your long patience will be rewarded—they won't say of you that 'there's no fool like an old fool!" she bawled after me, as I precipitately fled from the house.

Verily, Rosebank will need fumigation, to purify it from the small venom of such an evil-tongued witch as that!

## CHAPTER III.

### "WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY—"

HAVING effected my escape from Mrs. Gabriel, I went to my own house to recruit my inward man with food, and my outward man with a change of raiment, after a night's tumbling and tossing in a railway carriage. Wentworth was not there to receive me, he would be back, Mrs. Pritchard informed me, at six o'clock, and he was going to dine at Heath Hill at seven. I changed my dress, ate a mutton chop, tossed over the newspapers on the table, held a desultory conversation with Vixen, who had welcomed me home with

unmerited cordiality, and after debating with myself how I should dispose of the two or three hours on my hands, I decided to spend them with the old Major, who, Mrs. Pritchard told me, was suffering from "rheumatiz," and off I went to the Cedars.

It was a breezy, sunshiny day, and as I strolled lazily up our village street, and up the Major's "avenue," I looked about me, rather wistfully, in the hope that my pretty little pet might run out to meet me. At this hour she was often to be seen in her garden, training the roses, or chatting to the gardener as he trimmed the beds, for Monica was such a sociable little soul; she would talk and laugh with the old one-eyed cowman rather than sit an hour silent and alone. I used to like to watch the volatile maiden, springing up from her seat under the cedars in the summer, or in the bay-window in the winter mornings, throw

down the book on which a moment before she had seemed so studiously intent, and frisk out into the sunshine to gather a blossom, or throw crumbs to a bird—smiling brighter than any flower, warbling snatches of song more gaily than finch or robin. It seemed a necessity of Monica's nature always to have something to smile upon, that would give back her smile again. But it must only *smile,* for sorrowful, or even serious thought or feeling, she had as little real sympathy as a crowing infant of eight months old, who turns from a sad face as from something as strange as it is repulsive. And why shouldn't Monica—gay, happy, sweet-tempered Monica—why should not she, too, turn from every shadow in life, to dance in its sunlight, like the merry little fairy she was? But this morning Miss Graysbrooke did not come forth to welcome me; I saw no trace of her, except a garden trowel and a tiny dog-skin glove lying

beside the steps of the house-door, where she had perhaps flung them down to greet some more fortunate guest.

Ah! these light sunny natures are not those to whom we must turn for the fond fidelity that keeps the memory of absent love ever fresh and young. The pictures graven on such hearts are but sun-pictures, and as quickly fade!—What ails me, that I should moralise so grimly to-day? Something has gone wrong with me. That Mrs. Hartopp's idiot cackle has jarred a chord somewhere. I don't know what it is, and shall not stop to enquire. Self analysis is most unwholesome, and ploughs wrinkles all over one.

The neat maid-servant answered the bell, and smiled on me very brightly. Come, I had only been away three weeks, after all. I need not feel forgotten and neglected because all Cleobury had not rushed out to meet me.

"I'm back again to look after you all, you see, Hetty. You haven't got rid of the Doctor. How is the Major?"

"Very bad, sir, he's got a shocking rheumatics; but he's in the library, and Mr. Wentworth is with him."

This announcement caused me a slight feeling of surprise, though there was really nothing more natural than that Roland should be paying a professional visit at the Cedars. I walked past the servant-maid and went into the library. There they all were, very naturally grouped, and yet the effect on me was of something unusual—something strange—though *what* I could not have told for the life of me.

The old Major, rolled up in scarlet flannel and furs, sat in his arm-chair, with a table before him, on which was spread an array of feathers, silk, and horsehair, from which Roland was constructing baits for fishing tackle, with great apparent interest.

Wentworth's back was to the door, which was slightly ajar, and I stood a moment in contemplation of the group, unnoticed by any of them. You need scarcely be told that it was on Miss Graysbrooke that my attention was chiefly rivetted. At the first glance, I thought she was a trifle thinner—a shade paler, than when I last saw her, but I presently decided that it was only an effect of her dress. She was attired as plainly as a little Quakeress—none of the glittering gew-gaws and floating ribbons about her, in which she usually delighted. The simplicity of her grey dress, and the plain black velvet band round her white throat and slim waist, might have suited Miss Barham herself. It was very becoming to her, too, giving a tone of delicacy and refinement which her plump figure and dimpled face did not always boast, although I, at least, never missed it, in the healthy freshness of her girlish charms.

She was in her favourite attitude, half-kneeling on a low stool, leaning on the arm of her father's chair. He would have bellowed like a bull of Bashan at any pressure less light. Her rosy lips were pursed up with the pretty mock pensiveness of a child, watching the manufacture of some promised toy, and her blue eyes followed every movement of the young surgeon's fingers, as he deftly fashioned some entomological monster, for the enticement of some ignorant, credulous fish. And to call that innocent, simple-minded creature (the girl, I mean, not the fish,) a coquette, forsooth!

"There, Major," said my Assistant, offering his May-fly, or his cock-roach, or whatever he called it, to the old gentleman, who had watched him with an interest as eager and intense as his daughter's, and a silence as profound as if he had feared the trout in the river could overhear what was

said ;—"there's a fly that the most experienced trout in the Tyme will rise to in March."

"It's a beauty!" said the Major, gazing on it with much such an expression of admiration as *my* face might have worn at the same moment, while I looked on Monica. "Roland, my dear boy, I'm so much obliged to you ; when my hand was steadier, I could make flies that would tempt any river fish that swims ; but now it is as much as I can do to hold a rod—there was a fly, I forget its name, that used to be very successful with grayling, but I have not seen it this long time."

"I know," cried Roland ; "a brown body, wasn't it? with bluish wings? I could make it, if I could find the feather." And he began to search among the tufts on the table.

"Take this, Mr. Wentworth," said Monica, holding out the speckled plume of a

guinea-fowl; "do make a fly of this—it is so pretty."

And she bent forward and laid the feather on his hand, but so lightly, I could vow her white fingers never touched him.

He looked up at her, however, and then she drew back, as if ashamed of her slight familiarity, and the faint pink rose to her cheek, so very faint, in a complexion less delicate, it could not have been detected.

That child is as frightened of Roland, as if he were a harsh schoolmaster. Is it worth while to be a handsome young man, to scare a pretty girl like an old "bug-a-boo?"

As her eyes looked timidly away from him, they wandered to the door, and rested on me, and she sprang forward with such a cry of genuine surprise and delight, that I assumed the privilege of old affection, and

just did what might have made even a frigid snow-man like Roland, thaw on the spot for envy—I caught her up in my arms before her father's face, and kissed her. She freed herself from my embrace with a laugh, and took refuge behind the Major's chair, who greeted me with even more than his usual cordiality.

"Welcome home, Doctor Guy!—welcome to the Cedars, too!—but you are a prize in the matrimonial lottery now, you know, and you must be more guarded with our girls, or we papas will be holding you to your intentions, if you make so free with our little maids—eh, Wentworth?" chuckled the old Major.

"So I've caught you off duty, Roland," I said, as I shook hands with him. "When the cat's away, the mice will play;—where are our patients, I should like to know?"

"Why, they are all cured, Doctor,"

laughed my Assistant, "or else they have not confidence in me, and reserve all their complaints for your private ear. I think Major Graysbrooke's is almost the only name on the sick list at present."

"Except old dame Morris," said the Major, "who keeps her bed, I verily believe, for the pleasure of Wentworth's attendance, and for the good things which my Money—who spoils her—takes her every day."

As Monica met my eyes, she blushed deeply, and then, as if vexed at my unintentional scrutiny, she turned away with a half-petulant movement.

"It was Lady Janet, papa, who sent things for Mrs. Morris—she told Rosamond to take them, and I offered to go in her place, because the walk was too long for her."

"And does Miss Gilroyd take your rides in exchange for her walks, Monica? for I

met her this morning, with Sir Charles and Aurelia Comberhill, and I never saw her look so well."

"Oh, yes," she answered carelessly, "I know, they called for me on their way to the meet, but I could not leave Pups, and I don't care for riding; I daresay" (with a glance at Roland) "I should like it as well as Rosamond, if I could do it as well, but when I can follow the hounds no further than the middle of the nearest horse-pond" (with an arch smile at me) "I think I had better stay at home."

"Well, well, my dear," said the Major, "it is best so, for the present—your poor old Pups can't ride, so you are better at home, with him—when you have a husband, you will have to do what *he* likes. Well, Crofton, I'm glad to have you back, I've missed you sadly—no offence to Wentworth—he's a clever lad, but we old fellows get on best together."

"No offence at all, Major Graysbrooke," said Roland, "but I will leave you now to my principal's care. It will not do for you to monopolise the whole medical staff of Cleobury."

"Don't go yet, Mr. Wentworth," pleaded Monica, "I have got some foreign feathers somewhere in my work-box, and I do so want you to make a fly of them—they are mottled, just like an insect I often see the fish in our brook leaping at."

Miss Graysbrooke's "work-box" was a carved ivory toy, that some one had sent her from India, and bore about the same relation to *work*, I should say, as a lady's illuminated and bejewelled missal does to prayer. It was full of all sorts of knick-knacks—dried flowers, broken ornaments, her kitten's bead collar, her squirrel's silver chain—but the very last thing I should have expected to find in Monica's work-box was a good serviceable needle and thread.

This casket of miscellaneous treasures stood on a bracket, at the further end of the room, and the damsel went towards it, followed by my Assistant, while the Major commenced a long and doleful narration of his symptoms and sufferings.

I confess I was more intent on watching the couple at the other end of the room, and listened so abstractedly, that my patient detected my inattention, and flew out into one of his brief furies.

"You are not listening to me, Crofton, and I don't know how you can, while Miss Graysbrooke keeps up that confounded chatter. Monica! I wonder at you! let Mr. Wentworth go to his work, and either leave the room while I am consulting my medical adviser, or keep silence if you choose to remain in it!"

The young lady took her own method of appeasing the paternal wrath. Not a word did she offer in reply, but she danced over

to her father's chair, silenced his remonstrance with a kiss, and folding her arms round his neck, she cuddled his grey head to her bosom, pressing her soft cheek against it—glancing arch triumph at the spectators from her laughing blue eyes, that said, like Tennyson's mermaid—

"Who loves me?—who loves *not* me?"

The old gentleman's growls died away in a complacent murmur, and even the grim Roland's expression softened as he gazed. How could he help it? he was not *quite* a stock or a stone.

As he took his departure, he paused at the door, to say—

"We shall meet at six, Dr. Crofton—I dine at Heath Hill to-day, are you going too?"

"Nay, I should be self-invited—but I may look in, some time in the evening—and you, Monica?"

She shook her head.

"My daughter," said the Major, loftily, "is not one of the satellites at Heath Hill, Guy; it is very well for Miss Comberhill or Miss Gilroyd" (Roland winced) "to dance attendance on Lady Janet, in her son-in-law's house, but in Monica's position, she would be wanting in self-respect if she made a step forward to meet a gentleman who has not lately been so devoted to *her* as I should have expected to see him."

Miss Graysbrooke looked at Roland—their eyes met; then he bowed, and disappeared. She glanced at me, and blushed again.

Was she blushing at her father's indiscreet censure of her *fiancé*, or because I had caught the look at Wentworth? Did that rose-tint express anger or jealousy, or mere maiden bashfulness? Any way, Mrs. Hartopp's story of the broken engage-

ment is evidently wrong. The slackening of the tie seems rather on the part of the gentleman, than of the lady, *this* time.

## CHAPTER IV.

### "RISING ON HER PURPLE WING."

"MR. WENTWORTH is with the ladies in the drawing-room, Doctor, and the other gentlemen haven't come out of the dining-room yet."

As the butler at Heath Hill gave me this information, I stood in momentary indecision as to which division I should join, but a burst of jovial laughter from the dining-room, and a cheery gleam that flashed through the opening door, put an end to my hesitation—convivial taste conquered gallantry. I was received with a general shout.

"Here comes our Laughing Philosopher."

"A libation to Plutus, in honour of our Cleobury millionaire!"

"To the learned alchemist who has discovered the true philosopher's stone!" cried one.

"And the elixir of youth, too, by Jove!" cried another.

"How about the Lady of Rosebank?"

"Have you captured your 'Insect Queen' yet?"

And at a sly whisper from Sir Charles, the boy who sat on his knee struck up, in his childish treble, the old-fashioned ditty, "I'd be a butterfly, born in a bower, kissing all buds that are pretty and sweet."

A roar of laughter applauded, amid which I made way to the seat our host offered me, menacing Charlie with my finger, as I patted his curly head.

"Dr. Guy is a humbug," said the Baro-

net, "you pretend to be so devoted to the ladies, yet you seldom make your appearance among us until they have quitted us."

"'Without prejudice,' as the lawyers say, Sir Charles, I hope to join them presently. Send that young rascal to his grandmamma, he stole in here, I know, after she went into the drawing-room."

"So he did," laughed the father, "and after Wentworth had left us, too. He is not afraid of you, Crofton, you have no authority."

"Ah, well, there's a great want of discipline, I know; but when I throw up my commission, you will have a martinet in my place."

"We shall have no one we shall like better, in your place, than yourself, old fellow," said Sir Charles. "We will drink the Doctor's health, with all the honours,

may he long enjoy his good fortune, and enjoy it in our society."

"And have a charming wife to share it with him," said Danvers.

"But we must have her name," shouted the others. "Dr. Crofton and the future Lady of Rosebank—Miss—Come! give us her name, Doctor!"

"I promise you shall know her name as soon as—"

"As soon as he knows it himself," said a wag; but I *did* know it, although the revelation of it would as yet have been premature.

The conversation presently flowed into other less personal channels, and after a while I found an opportunity to say to Cotgrave:

"Anything going wrong between you and Monica, Sir Charles?"

He looked a little embarrassed as he answered:

"Nothing at all; why do you ask?"

"I thought the old Major seemed rather hurt at what he hinted was some neglect on your part towards his daughter; he seemed to think you were not so attentive as you ought to be."

"Neglect?" repeated Sir Charles, excitedly, "d— it, it is *I* who am neglected! Miss Graysbrooke treats me extremely ill —it is deuced hard on a fellow to be kept neither bond nor free, at a girl's caprice, and expected to wait on her, that she may parade her conquest, I suppose."

"Nay, my dear fellow, it was not Miss Graysbrooke who complained, it was her father."

"Her father be *dashed!*" cried the Baronet irreverently, "what does the old fool want? I'd have married his daughter six months ago, if she would—I am ready to marry her to-morrow, if she will—but hang it all, when a man proposes to a pretty

girl, he does not expect to be kept waiting for her, till she is so old and ugly that nobody else will take her."

"That time is far distant for Monica," I replied laughing, "but you know you agreed to her conditions six months ago; you might have rebelled then, and broken off the affair with a better grace."

"I wish to heaven I had!" said the Baronet moodily, "I can't stand this state of things much longer; is it too late to break off now, Crofton?"

"Pooh, nonsense! you don't want to break off; go up to the Cedars to-morrow and tell Monica to fix the day; it will all come right when once she is your wife, she will be as docile and submissive as she is fitful and wayward now."

Sir Charles only responded by a dismal sigh, and rising from the table, the young men dispersed; some to the smoking-room, some to the billiard-room, a few, among

whom were my host and myself, to join the ladies in the drawing-room. As we approached, the rich tones of Rosamond's voice floated to our ears, singing some Italian melody which was doubtless very grand, but I would much have preferred "the Last Rose of Summer," or "Endearing young charms." But I was glad of the excuse of not interrupting the music, to stand a few moments at the door and observe the singer attentively. She was evidently none the worse for her morning exercise, she was scarcely less beautiful than I had thought her then, a thousand times more beautiful than I had ever thought her before. She had abandoned the severe simplicity of attire, on which she seemed formerly to pride herself, and was dressed, not gaily—still less, gaudily—but more richly than she had ever been before, since she came to Heath Hill. The sweeping folds of her satin dress, the lace

that decked her bosom, the jewels that sparkled on her arms and in her hair, formed a toilette more suitable for the Lady of Heath Hill, than for the humble companion of its present mistress. I thought she looked queen-like, and as I should wish her to look when she receives my friends at Rosebank, and the thought glanced across my mind, can she be rehearsing the part? is this splendid raiment a gala costume, worn in compliment to my return?

Wentworth stood by Lady Janet's chair, and she was talking to him with great animation, but he did not profit much by her conversation if his ears were with his eyes, for *they* were rivetted with no very amiable expression on the Baronet, who, with somewhat tortuous movements, was making his way to the piano. I wonder does Roland also think that Monica is neglected? As Rosamond ended her song,

Sir Charles said something to her in a low voice.

She turned her regal head, crowned with beauty's true diadem of shining braids, that were never bought at the hair-dresser's, and looking round she caught my eye. Instantly her beautiful features brightened with a joyous smile. If ever a woman's glance said "welcome" to any one, Rosamond's lips said that word—that unspoken word to *me!* I believe I threw sufficient expression into *my* look, to respond to such a greeting (it was not from want of practice, if I failed), but I could offer no further homage just then, as Miss Barham, who was sitting alone in a distant corner, made me a sign to go to her. I obeyed, and took the seat she pointed to, beside her.

"Well, Annie," I said, "you see our patient is improving. I call her *our* patient, because I believe you deserve as

much credit for the amendment as I do; she looks quite another girl now."

"I don't know," answered Miss Barham doubtfully, "I am not quite sure that it *is* an improvement."

"No? why what would you have? look at her! is that the moping, discontented girl we were trying to cheer a few weeks since? There's animation, spirit, vivacity! There's a colour, a brilliancy, a life! There is a sense of enjoyment—a power of amusing and being amused! And you don't call that an improvement?"

"Is not the alteration too sudden, Dr. Crofton?—is the brilliance the glow of health, or the hectic of fever?"

"Fever? pooh — nonsense! But you mean metaphorically. My dear Annie, I wish you would lay aside that poetical style of speaking!"

"Don't be angry with me, my friend; I do not dispute your success in treating

Rosamond's 'physique.' She is certainly much better in bodily health than she was. But—"

"But she is going too fast now, to please you; she is resuming her former habits and pleasures; she is shining, as a pretty woman who is conscious of power likes to shine; and your prudery takes alarm."

"My prudery? you would say my prudence, if you were good-natured—which, for a wonder, you are not just now. You *will* not understand why I am not quite satisfied about Rosamond. Guy, I am not sure that she is happy."

"If she is not, she is on the right way to be so."

"I am not sure of that, either."

I began to feel exasperated against Miss Barham.

"Really, Annie, you are growing tedious. Do you wish a girl of twenty to be as staid and thoughtful as an elderly woman? It

is a symptom of returning health in Rosamond that she is beginning to forget the trials of her position, and those through which she has passed, and is basking, as a girl should do, in the pleasures of the moment."

"Does Sir Charles represent those pleasures?"

Annie glanced at Cotgrave as she spoke. He was bending over Rosamond, who was now teaching little Charlie the game of *solitaire;* but it was not difficult to guess whether the child or his instructress was the chief object of interest. I never heard that *solitaire* was such a very absorbing amusement. Every now and then Charlie let a glass ball roll down on the floor; and once when Rosamond stooped to pick it up, I certainly saw Sir Charles lay his hand on hers—as he stooped for it too. It was a mistake, of course, and though she withdrew it quickly, she did not look offended,

nor, indeed, anything but calmly indifferent. Annie saw the little movement, too—I read it in her eyes as she glanced at me, and I replied to the look—

"She doesn't care a fig for him!"

"I do not think she does; I only hope he will not think so either."

"He is engaged to Monica; Miss Gilroyd knows that his attentions can mean nothing."

"Ah, such an engagement is worth very little—a bond worn so loosely, that either party may slip it, unblamed; but you are very indulgent, Doctor."

"'Love, and let love,' is my motto, Annie; why should not Rosamond amuse herself with a little harmless flirtation, as Monica does, without scruple, on every opportunity—little puss!"

"Rosamond is very different from Monica—she is of a deeper, more earnest nature. Such a nature cannot long find rest in frivolity—still less in falsehood."

"You and Wentworth are always preaching about 'depth' and 'earnestness.' Fiddle-de-dee! say I. Solemn saws for wrinkled lips. Youth and beauty are made to rejoice in the sunshine."

"And when the shadows begin to lengthen?"

"Let them look away from them as long as they can, at least. You and Roland are epicures in misery; and, not content with even your own share in life's bitters, you are always inviting others to pledge you in your dismal draught. I say to you, in the words of the poet—

"'Turn your head, my brother, your tears fall in my wine!'

It is just such wretches as you who make half the gloom you deplore—why won't you let better-disposed people dance to the brink of the grave, if they like, without tolling their dirge for a measure? Laugh while you can—weep when you must—say

I; and I am charmed to see that fair Rosamond is a convert to my philosophy!"

Annie turned her soft, clear eyes on me, with that sweet smile—which always took me back, by some strange witchery, to twenty years ago—to the walk by the river-side, and the hedgerows, fragrant with honeysuckles.

"Roland and I, Dr. Crofton," she said, "belong to a school of philosophy quite different from yours—and we mean to dispute your proselyte with you. Young as Rosamond is, she has been made free of the sad guild of mourners; and the experience bought in that school is too costly to be lightly bartered for such air-bubbles as you offer."

"And so, because she had cause for weeping once, you would never suffer her to wipe away her tears? Fie, Annie! tears stain pretty faces. Thank goodness, the healthy impulse of youth is too strong

for you—'Earnest nature?'—earnest rubbish! Would you quarrel with the butterfly and the humming-bird because they find an all-sufficing joy in the brief brightness of the summer day?"

"By no means—may they enjoy it to the utmost; but to those who have higher instincts, their rightful provision must not be withheld, though they must seek it in the wilderness, or through the tempest."

"And pray what is this rightful provision which poor Rosamond is to be driven forth into the wilderness to seek, with a pilgrim's staff, and peas in her shoes? I only hope that in the lack of the expected manna she may not have to fall back upon the peas!"

"I shall not answer you, Dr. Crofton, my oracles are too grave for such a scoffer."

"Wentworth has set off on the same lively pilgrimage, I should think—at least, *he* never offends you with too much fri-

volity—he is always on the trot from morning to night, trying, as he says, to 'diminish the great sum of human suffering.' I am sure he increases the sum of *my* suffering, for I am never sure of a meal in peace, with his everlasting '*va et vient.*'"

"Guy, you are hideously ungrateful! Roland takes all your work off your hands, and it is owing to his untiring self-denial, that you have the leisure to amuse yourself as you do."

"Come! I like that! I fancy some work of mine—hard work, too, in former days, went to form this practice that keeps him so actively employed. And, after all, Annie, I rather doubt your favourite's skill, for I am sure, since he came to me, that confounded bell tinkles five times oftener than it used to do. People want the doctor much oftener than they did. Bad sign for the health of the district!"

"What was the use of their wanting

him when he wouldn't go? and you know, Guy, you often would not go, unless your patients were seriously ill."

"So much the better for them at Christmas; but of course I can have no objection to Wentworth's going every hour, if he likes, to every house in the parish, but I think he takes a great deal more out of himself than he need, by the absurd 'earnestness' with which he throws himself into the study of every case he undertakes —why should he feel so profound an interest in every pauper's pains and aches?"

"Will he not learn as much by the study of a pauper's pains, as by those of Lady Janet or Lady Comberhill?"

"Possibly, but the study will be less agreeable! it would be pleasanter to you to try a new air on your own Broadwood than on Farmer Hilman's cracked, jingling old harpsichord?"

"But the suffering is greater to these

poor patients, who have not the alleviations that the rich enjoy, and Roland's kindly sympathy is in itself so great an alleviation to them!"

"And so he 'diminishes the sum,' I suppose? but he doesn't, he only takes it on himself by the labour and anxiety it costs him—the sum remains the same, only less equally divided. After all, Annie, why should I be depressed by the thought of the vast amount of physical evil in the world? If millions suffer, each unit of those millions can bear but his single burthen—I am one of the units, and my own is enough for me. By harrowing up my soul with the contemplation of anguish I am powerless to relieve, I increase my own burthen without lightening theirs—or if I take any part of the load on me, if they have less, I have more, and in my case, I think with Paddy, that 'one man is as good as another, and a great deal better too.'"

"Away with you, then, Guy—flutter your brief moment with the butterflies and humming-birds in the sunbeam, but do not find fault with the eagle, who would rise to the sun himself, through the shadow and in the storm. Look! there's Lady Janet has sent Miss Danvers for you."

## CHAPTER V.

### A DRAWN GAME.

"And gladdening, 'mid her shame, to feel her power,
Smiled, and said, Ah, he loves me, I shall conquer."
LORD LYTTON.

LADY JANET received me with quite eager cordiality.

"Aurelia, my dear," said she to Miss Comberhill, "just go and sing that duet I am so fond of—Miss Gilroyd will accompany you—I want a little private talk with Dr. Crofton."

Aurelia went, nothing loth. The gentlemen were all gathered round the piano, and she swooped on her querry, like a hawk on a dove-cote—not that they were very dove-

like, either, most of them,—and she had scarcely crossed the room when her ladyship began in an eager whisper—

"It will all be settled soon, now, won't it, Dr. Guy?"

"It is all settled, my Lady," I replied, innocently, "and the money is safe in my banker's hands."

"Pshaw! I know that—at least, I supposed it would be so when you went up to town. I meant that it will be settled, now that you are a rich country gentleman, that you give up your practice, and propose to Miss Gilroyd to-morrow."

I was hardly prepared for so very rapid a decision, and ventured timidly to suggest that I had scarcely yet made sufficient way with the young lady to make such a step prudent.

Lady Janet flew into a rage—

"That is so like your dilly-dallying ways—you'll die an old bachelor, after all, you are waiting, as usual, until somebody

else steps forward, and snaps up the girl before your eyes!"

"Somebody else?"

I looked towards Rosamond. She was standing behind Miss Comberhill, who, seated at the piano, was running her fingers wildly up and down the keys, in search of some melody gone frantic, (that, I suppose, is what people mean, by "catching a tune.") Her stately figure, drawn to its full height, her graceful neck arched, her dark eyes, blazing with a strange light—was it triumph? was it defiance?—as they turned, now on Sir Charles, who was speaking to her in a low tone, more suppressed and softened than Monica, or Monica's papa, might have altogether approved, and now on Wentworth, who, a little withdrawn from the group, was watching it with a cold severity of reproof and disapprobation, quite ridiculous in a youth like him, who had—who *could* have—no per-

sonal interest endangered by Sir Charles's gallantries—rather advanced than endangered, I should say—if there was any significance in his attention to Monica, when I caught him with her, this morning.

Somebody else quoth Lady Janet? why, Sir Charles goes for nothing, being bespoken, and as for Roland, I have no fear of *him*, the love that might once have existed between these two is fast growing into downright enmity.

It was amusing to note how the girls had changed characters—Monica was now the quiet, modest, domestic little recluse, and Rosamond the brilliant coquette. No—not exactly that—there was nothing of levity or frivolity about her, but she wore the self-conscious air of a beautiful woman, sure of her power, and not unwilling to exercise it, as why should she be?

I admired her thus—as my wife I should have admired her thus—what pride can a

man take in the self-surrender of a girl who is simply ignorant that she possesses fascination for any other man? While I mused, her ladyship, who could not mark the expression of my eyes, or the direction they took, grew impatient of my silence.

"I can tell you one thing, Dr. Crofton, you shall never address one word to me again, if you ill-treat that poor girl, after drawing me on to say what I did to her."

"Good heavens, madam!" I cried, uneasily, "you surely have not—"

"There, there, don't excite yourself—they'll all be staring at you—I have not committed you to anything; but I *did* question Rosamond very closely on the state of her affections, and—"

"Well?" I asked eagerly. But the provoking old creature pursed up her lips, and shook her head solemnly.

"You cannot expect that I would betray a young girl's confidence in me, Dr. Crofton, nor, indeed, knowing Miss Gilroyd's reticence, can you expect that even in *me* she would place unreserved confidence; but you may trust my discernment in such a matter. Do not vex her by trifling, or seeming to trifle with her, and you need fear no repulse."

Before I could answer, the music suddenly ceased, and the group round the musician dispersed; Rosamond turned away from Sir Charles, and came up towards me. I took the hand she held smilingly out to me, and would have retained it a moment but for that plaguy Baronet who followed her—confound him—why couldn't he stop with Aurelia?

"You can claim no professional privilege now, Crofton," says he, with a laugh, "you are on an equal footing with us poor squireens, and you may not hold a lady's

hand on pretence of enquiring after her health. Moreover, Miss Gilroyd is no invalid now, if we may judge from her bloom; she owes that bloom not to *you*, but to *me*, to a fortnight's daily race over the heather on Freya the Fleet, and to a couple of rides to the hounds."

"It was *my* prescription, Sir Charles, I appeal to Lady Janet if it was not? you shall not rob me of my due."

"Mr. Wentworth does not approve of your advice, Doctor," and Rosamond turned suddenly on the young man, who was arranging the chess-board for a game to which Miss Danvers had challenged him. "The bloom on which Sir Charles is pleased to compliment me, is scarcely a healthful symptom in his eyes."

He answered carelessly, "It is unfair of you, Miss Gilroyd, to accuse me of differing from my principal on a point on which I was not consulted; you never asked my

opinion. I beg your pardon, Miss Danvers, will you take white or red ?"

"Miss Danvers," cried the old lady, sharply, "are you playing chess with Mr. Wentworth ? I can't allow it, I want him myself—take Charles instead."

Miss Danvers made no objection to the substitution, and of course Sir Charles could not; but the old lady didn't seem to have much to say to Roland when she got him, and presently she addressed her old chum, Lady Comberhill—any speech made to that respectable old person had the character of a public oration :

"My dear, you'll excuse me, I know—I take an invalid's privilege of retiring early; you will take charge of all these young people for me. Dr. Crofton, give me your arm. Miss Gilroyd, I do not want you to-night. Charles, ring the bell twice for my maid."

I escorted her to the door and delivered

her to that functionary, and she whispered—

"Be prompt for once, Doctor, your chance will be gone soon; next month I return to town; you cannot expect that a girl like Rosamond will wait for you, while you are making up your mind to ask her."

The presence of the maid obviated the necessity of a reply. I touched her hand in farewell, and left her; but such is the perverseness of human nature—of masculine human nature, at least—that although I had determined in my own mind, that Miss Gilroyd should be my bride, the old lady's insistence had the effect of retarding the movement she wished to hasten. If she had been so communicative to Rosamond respecting my intentions, why there was almost an understanding established between us; and every glance, every smile of hers had its own sweet significance.

For anything more definite—I have *gained* instead of *losing* time.

I went back into the room, where the young people were amusing themselves in various fashions, with very little reference to the lady president who was fast asleep in her chair.

Aurelia had pounced on our host, and formed with him the centre of a laughing, lively group, who were discussing some of the incidents of the morning's run.

I would have joined Rosamond, but to my surprise, she had challenged Wentworth to the game of chess, which Miss Danvers and Sir Charles had seemingly made no hand of; and as they sat a little withdrawn from the rest of the company, I adopted my usual tactics—"all fair in love," you know—and was soon deep in the study of some book I had taken from the table, while, unsuspected in my retirement in the

corner of a sofa, I pricked up my sharp ears and whetted my sharp eyes (sound the "h," please), to discover what the deuce Mrs. Crofton *in posse* could want with my Assistant. After a few silent moves Miss Gilroyd left her queen in check, and remarked in a light tone—

"You are very firm in your prejudices, Mr. Wentworth, they do not seem to be even modified by the lapse of years."

"Pardon me, Miss Gilroyd," he said, without lifting his eyes from the board, "I do not quite take your allusion."

"Three years ago you objected to a lady's amusing herself as an equestrian, and your disapproval seems as decided as ever, now."

"Have I presumed to express that disapproval?"

"Oh no," she answered with a dash of bitterness, "you have not, indeed, cared to express it except in *looks*."

He laughed.

"I was not aware that my looks were so expressive. You do me too much honour in condescending to study them."

"But I have read them aright?" she persisted, "you *do* disapprove of my riding now, as you did when we parted, years ago?"

"Only on borrowed horses—and, pardon me—with *borrowed* cavaliers."

From under her black eye-lashes she stole a look at him, in which again flashed that strange gleam of triumph.

"From whom have I borrowed my cavalier this time, Mr. Wentworth?"

He was silent.

"I confess that your reproach had some colour of justice in the past—"

He interrupted her.

"Let the past die, Miss Gilroyd, life is too short to be wasted in idle memories—worse than idle if they have garnered no

harvest of experience for the present and future to reap."

"You take the man's view; a man's life is in action, but a woman's is in her affections, in her emotions, and their root is in the past."

"Even were it so, a plant will bear neither blossom nor fruit if you are always prying at its root—your queen is in check, Miss Gilroyd."

She silently rescued the piece, and presently resumed—

"Let the past go, then; let us speak of the present only. Do you blame me because I snatch at the pleasures within my reach, without weighing their value too scrupulously? Not long since, you reproached me for refusing the consolation, which now you reproach me for enjoying."

"Your despondence need not have been excessive, your consolation need not be unworthy."

"You are severe, Mr. Wentworth," she replied haughtily, "in what have I shown unworthiness?"

"And you," he retorted, more warmly than he had hitherto spoken, "you are unjust; you compel me to speak on topics on which I have no right, no desire to speak; on which I cannot touch without offence; and then you accuse me of severity when I have no claim to any right of censure."

"But I give you the right—I allow the claim," said she eagerly; then with more softness, "though you care not for memories, yet for the memory of our dead friendship, tell me my fault—be severe if you will—only be *true*."

He did not immediately answer, his eyes remained rivetted on the chess-table, from which he was absently displacing the pieces; and when he did speak it was in

so low a tone that I could hardly catch the words.

"Be true to *yourself*, Miss Gilroyd, and you will need no counsellor to warn you that a lady places herself in a false position when any expression of the admiration she excites, may take the character of insult. She cannot be too jealous of the purity of a name which has no mother to guard—no brother to defend it."

"If there is no one to guard me from indiscretion, there is also no one who can be wounded by it; you speak in the interest of Monica Graysbrooke." And her lip curled.

"I speak in no interest but your own."

"Do not be anxious for our pretty little friend," she continued, regardless of the disclaimer; "she will not grudge me a passing homage which she can at any mo-

ment reclaim. Mr. Wentworth, are not those two quite an *enviable* pair? How charming to be able to wear one's fetters so lightly! surely, a wandering fancy that comes back to its allegiance, proves its truth better than a cold fidelity that never glances astray?—the bird returning to its cage, from its free flight in the woodland, is more prized than one that fears to take a step beyond the opened door."

I, Guy Crofton, cordially agreed with this sentiment, but Mr. Wentworth, it seemed, did not.

"I cannot say, Miss Gilroyd, how far your metaphor may apply to Sir Charles's loves," (he did not name Monica), "but in my view, a loyalty repenting its stains is a tarnished loyalty still; to me a mutual plighted faith is holy—whether vowed to man or God."

"But what of those whose love has not

the sanction of such a pledge? is the gift only, sacred, and not rather the altar that sanctifies the gift? — have you no pity, no indulgence for a faith that wavers only because it can lean on no answering fidelity?"

"No," he answered, "I have no pity for, because no belief in, a love that cannot *trust!*"

He rose as he spoke, heedless of the half-gesture she made to recall him, and turned to join the circle round Miss Comberhill.

She remained in motionless reverie— her long eyelashes veiled her downcast eyes, but on her red lips there hovered a faint smile, giving to her face an unwonted softness, and, as I watched her, I thought that her lovely features borrowed from that tender twilight gladness a hitherto unsuspected charm.

Then she rose, and was moving to the door, when Sir Charles intercepted her retreat.

"You must not leave us, Miss Gilroyd?"

"I am going to Lady Janet, Sir Charles."

"You will ride with us to the Gorses, to-morrow, will you not?—I have given orders that Starlight shall be ready for you."

"I shall ride no more, thanks—Miss Danvers wishes to ride to-morrow."

"She cannot manage Starlight," said the Baronet, fretfully.

"There's Brown Bowl—he is quiet enough for any one, and you can take Starlight, but, in any case, I shall ride no more—Good-night all."

She disappeared, without looking at Ro-

land, though she threw a glance and a smile at me.

Still I thought I would not ask Miss Rosamond to be Mrs. Crofton just yet.

## CHAPTER VI.

### MONICA, HOW COULD YOU?

"'I'll not marry you, my pretty maid,'
'Nobody asked you, Sir!' she said."

OLD BALLAD.

ON returning from a visit I had been paying at the other end of the village, one morning, as I entered my own gate, I met Raybold, Major Graysbrooke's old gardener and factotum, in close and apparently anxious conversation with my housekeeper.

"Never saw him so bad," were the words that fell on my ear.

"Hallo, Raybold! what's the row?—all well at the Cedars, I hope?"

"No, indeed, Doctor, there ain't nothin' well—it *is* a row this time, and no mistake!"

"What? is your master worse—has he sent for me?"

"No, sir, he sent for Mr. Wentworth immediate."

"And Mr. Wentworth is not at hand—what the deuce did he want with him, when I was by?"

"The Major isn't worse—not in his health, sir, but he's sadly put about, and it's Mr. Wentworth as he is calling for; he's in a shocking way about something—he swore at me when I asked him wasn't it you he wanted? and the Major don't often swear, Doctor."

"Never mind, I'll step across to him in a minute—the gout doesn't improve a man's temper, nor his language either, sometimes, Raybold. Mrs. Pritchard, when Mr. Wentworth comes in, send

him over to the Cedars, at once, will you?"

What could ail the Major? In my twenty years' acquaintance with him, I had not unfrequently witnessed his bursts of rage—the more furious in proportion to the slightness of their cause, and brief in proportion to their fury.

But since Monica had been his companion, the irritable old gentleman had very rarely given way to these ebullitions.

The dear little girl, with all her frolicsome gaiety, took as much care of her "Pups," as she called him, as she did of her bird or her kitten; she exercised the same power over him that she did over most of his sex, and could charm away his frenzies with a smile or a kiss, and ruled him none the less despotically because her sceptre was a silken one.

It must be a fiery wrath, indeed, if

Monica could not quench it. I marvelled if the Major's half-expressed discontent with Sir Charles had anything to do with it?

Some busybody had perhaps been commenting, before him, on the Baronet's rather too marked attentions to Fair Rosamond — they certainly were not quite such as an engaged man had the right to offer.

But what had Roland to do with that?

Fiery wrath! it was, indeed!

As I hastened up the garden walk, I caught sight of the flaming countenance of the gallant officer, glowering at me from the window of the dining parlour, red as a stormy setting sun.

His small grey eyes were bloodshot and vindictive, his lips purple and quivering, his silvery locks, brushed, as usual, to a point, bristled like a paper of pins,

or a pyramid of knives in a cutler's shop.

When the Major was serene, this hairy cone looked merely crystallised, like a loaf of sugar or salt, but when he was angry it wore a kind of metallic gleam. It looked, to-day, as if—had it not been metallic—the flaming face must have set it on fire; as it was, I wondered it was not red-hot.

I had scarcely crossed the threshold of the room when he darted out his arm at me, with his fist clenched in menace, and thundered forth—

"Where's the scoundrel got to?—what do you mean, sir, by coming here to screen him? What have you done, I say, with that d—d, sneaking, lying, cowardly, hypocritical cad of an Assistant of yours?"

To this polite address I answered, soothingly, "Don't excite yourself so,

Major, you'll throw the gout to your head. You'll bring on an apoplectic fit; what has my Assistant done to you to deserve all those pretty names, I should like to know."

"You would like to know—you do know!—you have aided and abetted him; you have been in the plot—you have played into his hands. I'll expose you both—I'll punish you both, by Gad!" screamed the infuriated Major, dancing up and down in his chair, and still menacing me with his clenched fist.

"Nonsense, Major, is this the way to treat an old friend? If Wentworth has wronged you, I'll help you to punish him; tell me all about it—where's Monica?" for a vague fear crossed my imagination that Monica and Wentworth had eloped together, but things were not so bad as that.

"Monica!" returned the father, "she's in her own room, the little jade, but I don't so much blame *her*—the child was a good child, when she was let alone; it is all owing to Cotgrave's neglect, and Wentworth, who has taken advantage of it.—I'll lock her up—I'll send her to a convent—I'll whip her well. Oh, dear, Crofton, I'm a poor, deceived, deserted parent!"

And he began to whimper.

I hastened to profit by his softening mood.

"Tell me all about it, Major. What has Roland done?"

"Done, sir?" he cried, breaking into a fresh access of fury—"this is what he's done!—he has gone slyly, sneakingly,—behind backs and round corners,—stealing my daughter's affections, sir! Making her the talk of the whole parish—making her break her plighted faith, sir!—*she*, a lady

by birth and position — a beauty — an heiress—led on to make a fool of herself for a penniless, fortune-hunting adventurer! —a pauper, a swindler—a—a—a beggarly country apothecary's beggarly shop-boy—by Jove!"

"Softly! softly, Major! that won't do —quite unparliamentary language that—recollect yourself. If you expect my sympathy, you must tell me what grounds you have for such an attack on my friend."

"Grounds, Dr. Guy? — the best of grounds!—the girl herself has confessed it."

"Confessed *what?* for goodness sake be more coherent."

"Yes, yes, yes! I'll tell you all about it. You know Cotgrave was here last night?"

"Not I—I have not seen him for this week, and more."

"He was here last night, at my special request. I thought it was time we should come to some clear understanding. A rumour had reached my ears coupling his name with Miss—you know—that girl of Lady Janet's—"

"Yes — but whence came the rumour, Major?"

"What matters," answered the old gentleman, fretfully; "there *is* one — Mrs. Hartopp told me so."

"Mrs. Hartopp?—ah! I thought *she* was at the bottom of the mischief. Well, you saw Sir Charles, you say?"

"I saw him; he spoke out fairly enough. He said he was ready to perform *his* share of the compact on the earliest day Miss Graysbrooke would do him the honour to name — that his probationary year had not yet expired, but that, since I chose to bring matters thus soon to the point, he would decline being made the

subject of any further trifling on the lady's side. He spoke like a spirited young fellow—and a gentleman to boot."

"And Monica?"

"And Monica wouldn't even see him—she went up to bed as soon as he drove up to the door, and sent down a saucy message, that 'when Sir Charles caught a fox with *two* brushes, she hoped he would spare *her* one!'"

"The little witch! so she is jealous—clearly jealous of Rosamond."

"Stop a minute, Doctor. Well, Sir Charles having delivered his ultimatum, went away. I went up to my daughter's room—with great difficulty, for my foot was very bad—but I *would* see her, and tell her what Cotgrave had said; and she turned on me quite coolly, and told me that she would not marry him—no, not then, nor at any time—she was sick to death of him, and the whole lot!"

"Capricious little minx! But what has Wentworth to do with all this?"

"Everything!" roared the Major, "as you'd find out if you wouldn't interrupt me. My girl is so spoiled—so variable—that I did not attend much to her professions of distaste for her lover—I thought she would change her tune in the morning; but in the morning she was as fractious as ever. And presently in comes Mrs. Hartopp—she's a very under-bred person, is Mrs. Hartopp — and she began chaffing Miss Graysbrooke in a very unseemly fashion, and telling her that it was said all over the village that she held assignations with Dr. Crofton's Assistant—hang it, sir—your *Assistant!*—and met him at old Goody Morris's cottage, up in the wood. There's a creditable report, Doctor, for a lady—for *my* daughter—to give occasion for!"

"Pooh!—nonsense! Mrs. Hartopp is a

gossiping liar — she invented the report herself."

"Good Gad, sir! do you take me for a fool?" (No such great mistake if I did, thought I). "What do I care for Mrs. Hartopp? As soon as she left the house, I spoke very sharply to Miss Graysbrooke on her levity—her imprudence—in giving cause for such a scandal. What business had she running after old women in the wood? You laugh, do you, Doctor Crofton?"

For I could not repress a smile at the old gentleman's phraseology, as I replied—

"Why, Major, if I understood you rightly, it was for running after *young men* in the wood that you blamed her just now—"

"You may laugh, sir!" stormed the irascible father—"but, egad! I have an account to settle with you, too, for betray-

ing my confidence in you—our old friendship, Crofton—" (with a whimper), "to bring a young serpent like that into the bosom of my family. You are his guarantee, and you must answer for it—by Jove!"

Flesh and blood could stand it no longer.

"Bless my soul, Major! what is there against Roland in all this?—he seems innocent enough."

"Oh, very innocent!" shrieked my companion, with a sardonic laugh—"all innocence! and Monica looked quite innocent, I promise you, when she declared to my face—to my very face!—that Mrs. Hartopp might chatter as she liked—it was all true, every word — she would not marry Sir Charles—she would die an old maid first—she loved Wentworth's little finger better than Cotgrave's whole body—and she would marry him to-morrow, if he chose! And

so she flounced out of the room, and—and —what do you say now, Guy Crofton?"

What *could* I say?

I was struck dumb with astonishment and dismay.

The avowal of a *belle passion* on Monica's laughing, childish lips, was as surprising as if her pet canary had changed his blithe whistle for a stock-dove's coo!

And for Wentworth, of all people!—of whom she had always seemed so afraid. I had thought her more likely to run *from* him than to run *after* him.

Oh! those amateur theatricals!—all the mischief is owing to them!

"But how far was my Assistant voluntarily implicated in the audacious confession of the little heiress?—how far—"

"Hoo! you deceitful, treacherous young ruffian, you!"

And, with a furious bellow, the Major sprang suddenly to his feet, as Roland

appeared at the door, wearing his usual air of calm, thoughtful self-possession—which changed to one of intense surprise at this emphatic, but scarcely courteous, salutation.

The Major had sprung to his feet—to his foot, rather—and stood, grasping the back of a chair with one hand, while he shook the other, in frenzied menace, at the new comer, balancing himself all the time on his healthy foot, as if practising a *pas* for a ballet—to a screaming accompaniment of threats, revilings, complaints, and curses.

Gradually the astonished perplexity on Roland's face gave way to a look of intelligence, and then an amused smile curled round his handsome mouth, and laughed in his clear gray eyes.

"Why, Major Graysbrooke!" he said, when his accuser stopped to take breath, "what madness is this? If you have any

cause of quarrel with me, bring it forward in private conference, and don't make your whole household your audience."

"All my household may hear, and be d——d!" yelled the savage assailant. "You take it coolly, you rascally scamp, you! You think you will make your profit of a silly girl's weakness—but not a shilling of hers will you get!—I'll take her to America, first! She's a ward of Chancery, too—I'll have you imprisoned—I'll—"

"For your daughter's sake, for your own sake," cried Roland, impatiently, "hear reason, and talk sense, Major; don't expose her to the gossip of the whole neighbourhood."

"Hear reason! hear him! have you or have you not, been visiting daily at Goody Morris's in the wood? Have you—?"

"I have been visiting Mrs. Morris for some days, certainly, as my patient—

you will hardly claim a right to interfere with my professional engagements, I fancy."

"Have you, or have you not, met Miss Graysbrooke there, not once, nor twice?"

Roland was silent, but the colour that rose to his brow, and the ominous gleam in his eyes, betrayed less of guilty confusion than of suppressed indignation.

"He can't deny it, you see, Crofton, he can't deny it!"

"Why should I wish to deny it? has not Miss Graysbrooke as much right to visit a sick neighbour, as I have to call on a patient?"

"You may palter and equivocate, sir, but your intrigues are found out, and I'll kick you out of the country—"

(With which foot, Major?)

"I'll post you in every town for a

penniless saw-bones, a fortune-hunting adventurer, a—"

The phrase was unuttered, for as the Major, with clenched fist, made at his adversary, the chair which he grasped for support, being on castors, and gaining impetus from his gesture, suddenly slid forward with him, over the polished floor, and glided past Roland like an insane velocipede, until brought up by the opposite wall, on which he stood, hopelessly staring, like a naughty boy in a corner.

At the laugh which neither Roland nor I attempted to suppress, he wheeled quickly round, and facing us again, poured forth a fresh volley of vituperation, until Roland's forbearance entirely gave way, and making one stride across the room, he forced his feeble enemy back into his seat, and thundered forth:

"Be silent, you old idiot! *I* tamper

with your daughter's affections? *I* seek to win her for her wealth? I wouldn't marry her, no, not if she were sheathed in diamonds!"

It was a real pleasure to me to see that prig of mine thoroughly losing his temper for once; but the effect of his unequivocal declaration was not what I should have expected.

The old soldier's hands dropped limp and powerless at his side, his eyes remained fixed on the young man's as he sputtered forth:

"You wouldn't? Say that again, Wentworth."

But Wentworth was mute.

"You heard him, Crofton? You can bear witness. Here, Monica! Monica! MONICA!"

The "crescendo" shriek with which he summoned her might have reached her in the chimney stack, but I suspect it had

not so far to travel, for ere it died away there was the slight rustle of feminine skirts, and Monica Graysbrooke fluttered into the room.

As she stood in the doorway, the light behind her veiled the expression of her features, though I fancied she looked slightly pale, yet her gesture had its usual careless grace, her voice the old ringing music, as she said.

"Why, Pups, what are you shouting so for? This is your third rage since last night, and it's two more than I can allow you!"

"Monica," said the Major, in a tone of solemn exultation, "come here."

She obeyed, and her father caught hold of her hands and held her, as if afraid she would escape from him.

"Now, Mr. Roland Wentworth, as you are a gentleman, repeat in my daugh-

ter's presence what you said to me just now."

But evidently Roland was of opinion that such a repetition was no part of the duty of a gentleman, for he remained mute as a stock-fish.

"You won't? well, Miss, here's Dr. Guy can testify that Mr. Wentworth has just protested in these very words, that he wouldn't marry you, no, not if you were sheathed in diamonds!"

"Now," thought I, "for hysterics and sal volatile."

A breathless pause—was there a slight droop of the white eyelids, just a faint quiver of the rose-bud mouth?

Monica spoke, quite composedly:

"Did he say so? it was very rude of him, then; but I know you have been bullying him, as you did me, about Mrs. Gabriel's vulgar, spiteful chatter, until he said anything to vex you—just as I did—

serve you right, you naughty Pups! Mr. Wentworth and I understand each other, he knows I have *his* secret, close as he keeps it, and that I should no more think of falling in love with him than with any rusty musty old bachelor, like poor dear old Dr. Guy there!"

And with a light laugh she disengaged her hands, and dropping a little kiss on her father's sharp hair, she fluttered out of the room again, and we heard her trilling all the way up stairs:

"When the swallows homeward fly—"

Swallows, indeed! did she take us for gulls? I confess we *did* look something like "boobies."

The old Major lay back in his chair, exhausted by his late fury, and with the pleasant consciousness of having exposed his child to a humiliation which he had no right to resent.

Roland had offered a woman the insult of refusing her love, and the insult had been flung back to him, with the counter implication that he was a puppy and a coxcomb.

Why *I* should feel and look like a fool I am not bound to confess—if my reader can guess, he is welcome to the reward of his sagacity.

Old Graysbrooke was the first to break the awkward silence that followed Monica's disappearance.

"Come, gentlemen, I own I have been wrong. I am a peppery old fool, and have forgotten myself, I ought to have known better than to have taken my Money's jest for earnest. Roland, my dear boy, you won't bear malice for a hasty word or two? Shake hands!"

And he held out his hand, but Roland did not move to take it. I think he would more easily have forgiven the

Major, if he could have forgiven himself.

The old fellow was distressed at his hesitation, and grew quite affectionate and pathetic.

"Hang it, Roland, a gentleman can but apologise—forgive and forget. Monica is such a spoiled baby; you couldn't, I am sure, injure *her* by letting this foolish joke of hers make her the talk of Cleobury, as it will if you and I quarrel over it."

Thus urged, my Assistant suffered himself to be entreated, and accepted the offered hand, though somewhat coldly and constrainedly, and then, pleading engagements, he took his leave.

I remained longer, to see my irascible patient restored to his normal quietude, and when satisfied that he was in no immediate danger of apoplexy or paralysis, I followed Wentworth's example, and took

myself off, taking leave with simulated gaiety, though my soul was bitter within me.

The barb of Monica's Parthian shaft rankled, none the less that I knew it was only a woman's unreasoning malice against the innocent witness of her humiliation. Nothing else, I know; yet—oh! Monica, how could you?

"Poor *old* Dr. Guy," indeed! a musty old bachelor, forsooth! What about "the sweet eyes, the low replies" with which you used to charm me? What about that stolen visit to my house when Frank Temple lay wounded? the confidence spoken so bashfully, yet so meaningly, of your indifference to your accepted swain? the innocent, simple, childish "abandon," the maidenly timidity and self-consciousness? Was all this mere spider-hearted coquetry? or were you making a stepping-stone of "old Dr. Guy" to reach his young

Assistant, who escaped your velvet paws, madam, in spite of the final scratch? Oh, Monica! Monica! how *could* you?

## CHAPTER VII.

### STOLE AWAY.

It may be imagined that neither Roland nor I was very anxious to find a pretext for not revisiting the Cedars, after our late discomfiture; nor that any account of the scene to which its master had treated us, was likely to transpire through any indiscretion on our part. We never so much as exchanged a word on the subject, or mentioned Miss Graysbrooke's name.

And yet, however it originated, a report soon circulated in whispers through our little community, that affairs had gone

wrong between the heiress and the Baronet, and that one or both of the gentlemen at the Cottage, were implicated in the quarrel.

Some said that Mr. Wentworth had proposed for Miss Graysbrooke, and was to wed her when she came of age, in spite of her father's opposition; others, that she had refused him and avowed her intention to be the long-looked-for Lady of Rosebank, while others declared that the Doctors' part in the business had been that of mediators only, endeavouring, though vainly, to effect a reconciliation between "the Squire" and his *fiancée*, justly estranged from him by his neglect and inconstancy; but all were agreed as to the fact that the engagement, such as it had been, was finally broken of.

I fancied that Sir Charles looked shy both at my Assistant and me; he rode seldom through Cleobury, and never pulled

up at the Cottage to invite either of us to Heath Hill, nor did Lady Janet's messages, penned by her fair secretary, drift like snow-flakes to my table any more. It might be merely a coincidence.

The hunting season was over. Sir Charles' town visitors had all departed; Lady Janet, with Miss Danvers and Miss Gilroyd, were gone to stay a short time with the Comberhills, near Lingford, and Sir Charles had some county business to attend to, that took him often there—in a direction that did not lead through Cleobury.

I fancied Annie Barham looked anxious, but she never spoke of Monica's affairs, and was, perhaps, only occupied with her own. Her brother and sister-in-law were expected home shortly, and she had many preparations to make, to receive them. One comfort in that change

would be, that we should soon be rid of Mrs. Hartopp and darling Gaby.

The alterations and improvements at Rosebank might then be begun in earnest; and—yes—then, the reproach should be taken away for ever, and Guy Crofton would leave it in the power of no saucy, ungrateful, young minx, to call him "a musty old bachelor!"

"Hallo! Mrs. Pritchard, that's a note from the Cedars! I know the Major's great seal six yards off. Nobody ill there again, I trust?"

"La, no! Doctor, they can't be very ill; they're well enough to be gone away."

"Gone away!" I echoed, so amazed that I stared at her without taking the note she held out to me.

(Our Cleobury servants brought in nothing on waiters that was not good to eat.)

"Didn't you know, Dr. Guy?—dear heart! to think *you* shouldn't have heard! —yes, a po-chay came to the Cedars last night, and took the Major and Miss Graysbrooke—and such a lot of luggage—to Lingford, to catch the mail train; they were to sleep at Lewborough and go on to France to-day."

I recollected myself, and taking the note, I dismissed Mrs. Pritchard and broke the seal.

Thus wrote the Major, briefly—

"My Dear Crofton,

"My foot continues so painful that I am getting anxious about it—or rather, my little girl is—and she has persuaded me to try what the celebrated surgeon Dupont, at Paris, can do for it. I am sure no Frenchman of them all can do better for me than my kind old friend, Dr. Guy; but you know, you leave a great

deal to your Assistant, and just at present it may be as well to avoid any cause for Cleobury scandal, eh? And my dear child wants a little change. So we're off at once. I am sorry not to have said good-bye; but I hope we shall all meet again next winter, and be as jovial as ever together.

"Kind regards and best wishes to Wentworth. Such a clever lad as he is, won't be long satisfied with country practice, I take it. There will be changes in Cleobury when we come back, I doubt; but no change, my dear Crofton, in the friendship of

"Yours most faithfully,

"PAUL GRAYSBROOKE."

At the bottom of this was written, in Monica's girlish scrawl—

"Good-bye for the present, dear Dr.

Crofton, keep a place in your heart for your absent, but loving little

"MONICA."

'Soh! she is gone! fairly beaten, in spite of all her wiles; with never a plume from all her conquests, to prank herself withal! She has cast off Cotgrave, she has *not* caught Wentworth, she is not even Lady of Rosebank! But she shall have the honours of war, for she flies with her face to the foe.

"Keep a place in my heart?" aye, that will I, sweet Monica, until that much exercised organ throbs no longer to feminine witchery; I *shall* be old *then!*

Poor, pretty, little Monica! I forgive you your wrongs to *me.* I hope to welcome you back yet, sweet, with a long train of vanquished adorers, who will bring no rivals near your throne—for, Monica, my little love, you *have* rivals—

whose smiles on "old Dr. Guy" are as bright as yours, and, possibly, more true.

As I still gazed wistfully on the farewell note, Wentworth came in looking grave and sad, and held out to me another letter.

"What, has she written to you, too? or is this from the Major?"

"This letter is from my brother-in-law, Dr. Crofton."

"Ha! I thought it might be from the Cedars; no bad news of Mrs. Hollys, I trust?"

"Both good and bad news."

"I will congratulate you on the good news first, my son; what is it, Roland?"

"Hollys is presented to the living of West Wylie, by an old college friend of my brother's, in whose gift it is—a good house — a small parish in a healthy

country, and seven or eight hundred a year."

"Come! that's unalloyed good news, surely. I fear I can guess the bad. Mrs. Hollys is worse?"

"She is much worse, my brother-in-law fears that it will be impossible to remove her from Northwych."

"Does she suffer much?"

"Very much, I fear; but chiefly from fever and restlessness; she is most anxious to see me."

"All right — off with you at once— I'll keep things straight till you come back."

"But, Doctor—"

"Well, what is it? out with it! can I do anything for you?"

"I hardly like to ask you—you have already been so kind in visiting poor Marian, and it is a long tiresome journey to take, merely to gratify an invalid's

caprice; for from what Hollys tells me, I have no hope that you can do anything for her relief."

I glanced rapidly over the letter he offered.

"Ah, it has come sooner than I expected, but neither you nor I could doubt what the end must be. I can do nothing for her—I can suggest nothing more than would occur to you; still, poor thing, as she wishes it, I will cheerfully sacrifice a few days' leisure to save her a disappointment, or afford her a gratification. Don't look so grateful for such a trifle, Roland, or I shall think that even such a little effort of self-denial is more than my friends expect from such a selfish fellow as they believe me to be. Send over to Brakefield for Jones to take our work for a few days, while I give some directions to Pritchard, and we'll start by the three train."

And so we did.

As we sped along, I tried to divert my companion's thoughts from the melancholy object of our journey, by forcing him into a conversation about Miss Graysbrooke—a topic which we had hitherto tacitly avoided.

He laughed with me at the Major's transparent excuse for visiting Paris—but thought it was the best thing he could do in the present state of affairs between Miss Monica and Sir Charles.

"The *present* state of affairs?" I repeated—"why surely the rupture is final now. Don't you think so?"

"Nay," he smiled, "I can form no opinion as to the finality of an arrangement based on anything so variable as a coquette's moods. If Sir Charles only continues cold enough, I should not be surprised if Miss Graysbrooke spreads her snares for him once more."

"She will spread them in vain, then,

She has not been so successful lately—eh, Roland?"

He laughed, but said nothing.

"Do you know, Wentworth, I thought at one time that you were not disinclined to woo the pretty heiress? I fancy, from what her father told us, that *she* may have made the same mistake."

"She could hardly have done that, I think."

"And you are not touched—not flattered—by the open preference of a charming girl, who gives you such a proof of disinterested attachment as to break off her engagement with a man of title and fortune for your sake?"

"My dear friend, do you know the young lady so little as to believe one word of such nonsense? Miss Graysbrooke's sole joy is in making conquests, which, once made, she flings aside as valueless. In the first days of her triumph over Sir Charles,

she risked losing him for so paltry a prize as Frank Temple—which she dropped the moment she had won it, and forgot, as a child forgets a broken toy. She broke off her engagement when she thought that desperate measure only could ensure her a victory over me ; it was a violent *coup d'état*, nothing more ; had it succeeded, she would have sacrificed me without scruple, and danced over my prostrate hopes to fresh fields of conquest."

"You were always too harsh in your judgment of that dear child."

"And you too lenient, and"—with a sly smile—"too forgiving."

"And you are perhaps not so insensible as you would have me believe. Monica's affection may prove to be deeper and truer than you think ; and you may yet think it worth stooping for, for all your pride and caution."

"I must stoop low for it, indeed, to take

it out of the mire of such abuse as her father pelted me with last night."

"Well, you must make allowance for the old gentleman's irritation at his disappointment in the match he had set his heart on."

"Doctor, if you won't mind, I'll light a cigar."

He suited the action to the word, and puffed away in silence.

I returned to the attack, but changed my aim—

"Now that Hollys will not need your fortune, you can afford to marry. Medical men should always be married."

"Your precept and your example are at variance, Doctor."

"You must 'do as I say, and not as I do.' Is it too late to make up your quarrel with your old flame, Miss Gilroyd?"

Puff! puff!—no reply.

"I know she and you are not on the

most affectionate terms just now; but 'lovers' quarrels' may be 'the renewal of love' in your case, as in others."

He took his cigar from his lips to say—

"Ours is no lovers' quarrel, Doctor Crofton."

"You mean that it is graver—more irreconcileable? You are almost vindictive to that poor girl, Roland."

"She can hold her own," he said, gravely, but with a smile in his eyes.

"She can, for she is as spirited as she is beautiful; still, you might win her if you tried? Her position is not an enviable one, for a woman brought up as she has been."

"I should not wish a woman to marry me merely for such social advantages as marriage could offer."

"Then, Mr. Wentworth, some man less scrupulous, less exacting, will step forward and carry off the prize in your sight."

"With all my heart, if the prize awards herself willingly to the richest or the first comer."

"You will regret it, perhaps, when too late. Remember, I have warned you."

"You are very disinterested, Doctor. In your allusions to that young lady, I remark a vein of sentiment—"

"A vein? my dear fellow, you should call it a *heartery!*"

"Pardon me—as far as Miss Gilroyd is concerned, I am convinced that your sentiment *is—in vain!*"

And having thus trumped my court card, the wretch replaced his cigar in his mouth, and smoked away triumphantly.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### OUT OF THE SHADOW.

"Vainly we stretch our arms to thee, through dark bereavement's night,—
Thou'rt passed *beyond* the shadow, into GOD'S unwaning light."

"HERE we are at Northwych! and there is your brother-in-law on the platform, with his two little girls beside him. He smiles, and waves his hand—he has no bad news for us to-day."

No, Mr. Hollys had no bad news. His wife, he said, had passed a restless night, and had been greatly excited about her brother's expected arrival; she had sunk

into a deep slumber in the early morning, from which she had roused up, greatly exhausted, but free from pain; she had then dozed off again, and he had left her in charge of the nurse, while he came with the children to meet us.

Wentworth put a few questions, and then, on receiving the reply, we exchanged a mournfully significant glance.

He evidently thought, with me, that the improvement on which the husband congratulated himself was merely the momentary flicker of an expiring lamp.

Our fears were not groundless.

We were met at the house door by the children's governess, wearing an anxious, melancholy face, who told us that immediately after Mr. Hollys had left the invalid, a sudden change had come over her, and she was now sinking rapidly.

Indeed, the most inexperienced eye, as it rested on the fallen features and motionless

form, would have seen that the long sorrow was nearly over now.

She was conscious, however, and not speechless; she smiled tenderly on her brother, and thanked me for coming with him.

I left him with her, and wandered away to the nursery, guided thither by the babble of childish laughter, that cheered me in that gloomy house.

The poor merry little brats—they knew nothing of their impending orphanhood, and were too accustomed to the dismal accessories of lingering sickness to be much impressed by a few deeper shades of sadness.

They would not miss their mother much, nor remember her long.

My experience has not confirmed the statement so common in story-books, that a dead mother's love remains indelibly impressed on the memory of a young child.

I wonder can our gaol chaplains verify the assertion of poets and sentimentalists, that the most hardened criminals retain a softening remembrance of "prayers at a mother's knee?"

(How wroth Annie Barham would be if she heard this cynical utterance of mine!)

The little ones clamoured for their uncle Roland, but soon contented themselves with the fairy tales I fished up to amuse them from some cranny in my brain, where they had been stored, with my baby orisons, I suppose.

Then they invited me to tea, and I repaid their hospitality with a conjuring trick or two.

It *did* occur to me that a little flirtation with the governess might be a pleasant pastime; but she was elderly, and rather deaf, so I dismissed that idea; and when their bedtime came, their father looked in to kiss and bless them, and take me down-

stairs to more generous fare than the nursery bread-and-butter.

I felt kindly to poor Hollys—he seemed to feel so deeply his approaching bereavement, and the joy he would otherwise have had in his preferment, was put aside so tenderly—so reverently—as something to which he had hardly a right, now that he could not share it with her.

Of course it was best for both that it should be as it was, and by and bye the pang will pass away, and grateful content alone remain, but I was sure that at this moment—and I honoured him for it—no selfish thought mingled with his sympathy for the yet youthful sufferer, going down in the flower of her age into the silent grave, out of the death-in-life in which she had so long languished.

Before retiring for the night, I accompanied him once more to his wife's chamber.

She was lying in a half stupor, and Roland sat beside her, gazing on her with a pitying, solemn tenderness.

Hollys broke into a fresh paroxysm of grief—

"To think," he said, "that the good fortune we have waited for together, for years, should now come too late!"

As he spoke, her eyes opened, brightened, and dwelt on him with reviving intelligence.

"No," she murmured, faintly, but with sufficient distinctness, "not too late—in good time—with no drawback, no burden, Harry, for you."

Then her eyes wandered to Wentworth.

"Roland," she faltered, "forgive me!"

"My poor darling," he answered, "what have I to forgive?"

She resumed, more faintly—

"I knew it—I guessed it all the time, but I was too selfish to refuse the sacrifice—and the children—good brother!"

The husband sobbed audibly.

She spoke again—

"Roland, lift my arms — round your neck, dear—as I used to do!"

He understood her, and, the strong man's self-command giving way before the childish memory, his tears dropped fast upon her pillow, as bending over her, he lifted the wasted, powerless arms, and laid them about his neck, "as she used to do."

It was her last expression of consciousness. In the night she died.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE LINGFORD FLOWER SHOW.

"It may be, that the gulf will wash us down,
It may be, we shall reach the happy isles."

TENNYSON.

I LEFT Roland to perform the last sad duties to the sister whose melancholy life he had done so much to cheer and comfort, and went back to Cleobury, to look after his patients, and to re-commence, or perhaps to conclude, my long chase of the "Insect Queen."

This time, however, I travelled by a later train, and only reached home at my usual dinner hour.

I was tired, and a little out of spirits.

That poor Mrs. Hollys!—her motionless form, her dark, wistful eyes seemed to haunt me. Poor eyes! they have done with weeping now.

Pish! what's the matter with me?—spleen, eh?—liver out of sorts—this railway travelling jars a man's whole system.

I could not help — from old habit— glancing at the windows of the Cedars, as I passed up the street. No light gleaming through the trees, in Monica's room—no little blooming face pressed against the window-pane to peer out into the gathering darkness, as my horse's hoofs sounded on the hollow arch of the bridge over the river.

It was dull, too, sitting alone in my house; nowhere to stroll to, for an hour's chat.

Heath Hill was too far, at this late

hour, even if I could rid myself of the fancy that the people there had grown cold to me.

Well, well, this state of things shan't last much longer. The lamp is flaring—it's too much trouble to get up and turn it down—that's the bore of being alone in a room.

I recollected seeing Rosamond move across the drawing-room at Heath Hill one night, to arrange the shade of the reading-lamp. How graceful she was! and how the light seemed to shine through her transparent, pink-tipped fingers, as she lifted them to the glass!

If she were here, now—no, not in this poky little den, but in my new drawing-room at Rosebank!

I leaned back in my chair, and closing my eyes, set myself to sketch a brain picture of my interior, as it might be, say this time two years, with my home finished,

furnished, and with Rosamond installed there—queen of it—and *me*.

Yes, there stands her piano, there stands her work-table, but she is not singing or working now; she is gliding about the room, arranging some of her elegant feminine trifles, with a dainty, delicate touch—not unconscious of the admiring gaze that follows her graceful movements.

How stately she is! how queen-like!—see! she pauses!—listening to a sound in the room overhead—a soft thud, thud, that with measured cadence beats the floor.

Is there any music like *that*, youthful mothers, to *you?*

She meets my eye—I hold out my arms to her—she turns—and—

A cold, moist nose touches my lips.

I open my eyes with a start.

It is only Roland's "Vixen," who stands on her hind legs to sniff at me, and ask

what has become of her master. And that took my thoughts back to the day—so long ago I had nearly forgotten it—when I surprised Miss Gilroyd kissing and hugging that snub-nosed beast—the dog, I mean, of course—Bother! I'm getting stupid—I'll go to bed—no I won't—I'll go and have a talk with Annie Barham!

Annie Barham!—and I lapsed into a fresh reverie—what will she say, I wonder, when I tell her that my choice is fixed, my fate irrevocably sealed? Will she smile on me that tender smile of hers, from which Time, that has dimmed the bloom on her cheek, the gloss on her hair, has stolen no charm of its early sweetness? Will she bid me cheerily "God speed," in the low, musical voice, that faltered in its farewell, in the blossoming orchard, twenty-five years ago? Or will the memory of those days come back on her heart—a woman's heart keeps such

memories fresh, so long!—and will the kind voice tremble reproachfully, the calm eyes shine with tears?

Poor dear Annie! it would be a high price to pay for my happiness if it cost her *hers*.

But though there may be a pang, it will be but brief; Miss Barham is a woman of sense and experience — she knows that these love-dreams have a shorter date allowed them for *my* sex than for *hers*.

A man of fifty is too young a bridegroom for a—I speak it reverently, dear Annie—an old maid. Besides, Lady Janet has committed me with Rosamond — it would not be treating the girl well, to turn back now.

But I won't go to Annie's to-night. I'll go to bed.

"Hallo, Burton!" (as my gardener tapped at the door, and entered), "what's the matter now? I am not going to stir

out to-night; if anybody wants me, they must wait till Mr. Wentworth comes home, or send for Jones; it is late, and I have given up night-work."

"There's nobody wants you, as I know of, Doctor," (ominous that!) "I made bold to step in, to ask leave to go to Lingford Flower Show to-morrow. I'm sending some early strawberries, and *such* gooseberries from Rosebank, they'll get a prize, surely!"

"Flower-show?—oh—ah—I'd forgotten the Flower Show in the Castle bowling-green, to-morrow. You may go, Burton, and take your gooseberries, if they are not too big for you to carry."

"I'll make shift to carry 'em, sir," said the man, grinning, "but they *be* thumping berries! Sir Charles's gardener was looking at 'em this morning, and he says they've got nothing like 'em at Heath Hill."

"Ah — Sir Charles — he's going, of course."

"Yes, sure, Doctor, why Lady Janet is to give the prizes, and all the ladies to help her; Lady Comberhill and Miss Aurelia, and a lot of 'em. They are coming back with her to Heath Hill, and she's going in a day or two up to town with them."

"She is, is she? That will do. Good-night."

And then I went to bed, and lay restless and tossing for hours, as men often do, I have been told, when meditating a proposal of marriage.

Towards morning, I slept, and dreamt that I saw Annie Barham sitting astride of a gigantic gooseberry, making a chain of wedding-rings.

I rose, feeling quite nervous and excited, and not a bit like myself. I had determined that the flower-show would be as

good an occasion as any for bringing affairs to a crisis.

There were such convenient nooks and corners in the old ruined castle at Lingford, where one could entice a lady-love, to put the final question which would end for ever the long and devious chase to which "Beauty lures the full-grown child."

Would the answer be "aye" or "no?" But why should I feel any uncertainty as to that? The girl was free, and what could she ask more than I could offer her? a good position, a luxurious home, and a loving husband in the flower and prime of life.

And yet—from innate modesty, no doubt—I could not help a faint misgiving. However, I stifled it, and, ordering my horse, trotted briskly off to the Lingford Spring Flower Show.

On my way I was stopped by that

tiresome fellow, Jones, who forthwith pounced on me, and turned me back again to visit one of Wentworth's patients (I had ceased to consider them *mine*)—who had selfishly chosen that inconvenient time to fall ill with bronchitis.

This delayed me another hour or more, and it was late when I got to Lingford, and all the people were assembled in the Castle grounds.

It was a bright, sunny day, in early June, and being a good opportunity to bring out the Spring fashions, the ladies of the neighbourhood had mustered in great force.

I made my way with difficulty through the crowd that thronged round the marquee, and peeped in. At the further end sat Lady Janet, distributing the prizes to the cottagers, with old Lady Comberhill beside her, negotiating, as usual, an amicable exchange of eyesight for hearing.

Aurelia was there, and the Misses Danvers, and a miscellaneous crowd of youths and maidens, among whom Rosamond still bloomed the Fairest of the Fair, and little Charlie lounged beside her, leaning his golden head caressingly against her, while his arms encircled her waist.

How fond that child is of Miss Gilroyd, and how fond his father is of *him*. Charlie can't bear Rosamond out of his sight, and Sir Charles is never far from his little boy. Hum, such a display of paternal affection is growing rather a bore!

It was known now that Monica had broken off her engagement, and more than one pair of bright eyes was turned towards the Baronet with an interest that had never shone in them while he was a bespoken lover.

I think more than one of the young ladies present, besides Aurelia—who turned a cold shoulder now on Augustus Danvers

—would have gladly offered him consolation. But I presume, from his keeping so close to his little son, that he meant to find his consolation in—paternal and filial affection!

If he was wearing the willow, it was a blossoming shrub to-day, for he looked brighter than I had seen him look for months.

While I was making my way towards the party, there was a movement and a murmur, the crowd surged forward, and swayed backward, and pressed round some object that I could not distinguish; and then some one who was standing on a bench near me, called out to his friends below him:

"It's a lady what's fainted."

Then there was a commotion, a rush, a cry for the Doctor.

"It's the Curate's wife, they're carrying her out."

And then people were pushed here, and pulled there, till in the opening vista I beheld Mrs. Gabriel Hartopp fallen prone among Burton's gigantic gooseberries. I warrant she would not have chosen that spot to swoon in if the bushes had been there as well! while the Rev. Gabriel made frantic efforts to raise her, and Sir Charles shouted for the Doctor, in a tone that might have cracked Lady Comberhill's ear-trumpet.

The people made way, and passed me up to the patient, who was just taking this opportunity of making a sensation, and I believe was no more insensible than I was myself. And so Lady Janet seemed to think, for she sat bolt upright in her chair, with her hands calmly folded in her lap, showing not the least interest in the suggestions that were buzzing around her for the invalid's relief.

"The Doctor?" I heard her say, as I

approached, "why, what good can the Doctor do her here, if she has fainted for want of fresh air."

"It's the smell of the vegetables," said the anxious husband.

"Then take her out of the smell of the vegetables. I want to get done with these prizes."

"Take off her bonnet," I ordered, (not that the thing it is customary to call a bonnet in these days could keep much air from her face.)

I was obeyed, with a singular result, for with the bonnet off came the "chignon," and two long ringlets appended thereto, and lo, Mrs. Hartopp's diminished head fell forward, shorn, at one stroke, of half its honours!

There was a general titter, in which many joined, who might have been moved to sympathy by their liability to a simi-

lar disaster, but these laughed the loudest.

"What are they laughing at?" enquired the blind lady. "Ah!" (as Aurelia whispered something in her ear) "her hair is come off, is it? the smell of the vegetables, I suppose."

Thereupon Mrs. Gabriel — more insensible than ever—was borne out of the tent, exhibiting in the progress a pair of legs that certainly looked substantial enough to have supported her and the marquee itself, and followed by pitying spectators, carrying her bonnet and her back hair!

I believe Mrs. Gaby never, to her dying day, forgave me that exposure, nor ever doubted that I caused it from sheer malice, though how was an innocent bachelor to suspect that any lady could supplement her natural charms?

Of course I was kept in attendance on

her for a few minutes, and when she had recovered herself sufficiently to take herself off — all of her that was left on — the party in the tent had broken up, and dispersed about the Castle grounds.

Lady Janet was with the Comberhills and the Danvers girls, promenading round the bowling-green, holding Charlie by the hand, and exchanging greetings with the friends whom the child named to her, as they drew near.

But Rosamond had vanished, and I went in search of her, thinking that after all a Flower Show—even in a ruined Castle—was not the most convenient scene for a marriage proposal.

In one corner of the quadrangle of the court, stood a ruined turret, to which visitors were accustomed to climb for the view commanded from its parapet. There, while making my adieux to the Hartopps,

I had descried a gaily attired group perched on its summit, and among the fluttering ribbons and waving plumes, I fancied I had distinguished the starry vans of my Insect Queen.

I hastened to the spot, and was met by a stream of lovely ladies, descending the narrow stair, carefully guarded by their attendant cavaliers. I stood aside, squeezed flat against the wall, to let them pass—but no Rosamond, and no Sir Charles!

The brilliant bevy defiled out of the gloomy archway, and sparkled out into the sunlit quadrangle, with babble and laughter, and pretty coquetries of all sorts, and then I proceeded slowly, painfully—for the stair was winding and plaguy steep—to ascend in search of the missing prize.

Ere I reached the top, I heard the voice

of the Baronet, though I could not distinguish the softer tones of his companion.

Really, Sir Charles is not showing a gentlemanly consideration for a girl in Rosamond's friendless position. What does he mean by hovering round my Rose? it is time for me to come forward at once and declare myself, if only to put a stop to his attentions, which are becoming compromising to her.

Up I toiled; when I had reached the last turn I stopped to take breath, and then Rosamond's clear voice fell on my ear, in tones of indignant expostulation.

"Let me pass, Sir Charles, I do not choose to be detained; I wish to rejoin your friends. Let me pass instantly!"

And a raised note in the silver voice, and a quick stamp of the little

foot, betrayed that Rosamond was in a passion.

"One word, Miss Gilroyd—Rosamond, only one word—you have so studiously avoided me of late; tell me how I have offended you?"

"You are offending me now—deeply—irreconcileably—you would not dare thus to insult any woman less utterly unprotected than I am!"

"Oh, Rosamond! if you will but give me—"

Give him what? I never knew; for making a hasty step forward, to respond to the poor girl's appeal for protection, I missed my footing on the broken stair, and down I came! roll—rumble—rumble—roll—till I landed with a thump, at the bottom of the detestable old corkscrew, and commenced an anxious enquiry whether any bones were fractured.

No, there was no damage to my bones,

but the damage done to my garments was, in every sense, more detrimental to my suit! In broken bones I might have received pity and sympathy, but for rent clothing—!

Mrs. Hartopp, you were avenged! I sat down on the cold stones—very cold I felt them, too.

Presently, down rattles the Baronet to seek the cause of the interruption to his *tête-à-tête*, and over his shoulder peers the beautiful face of my bride that shall be, and when her eyes rest on my still seated figure such a sweet anxiety and concern shadow them, that had it been possible I would then and there have snatched her to my heart, and claimed the right to defend her from all England's baronetage for ever!

But how was it possible, when on the jagged edge of that cursed old wall, a great piece of cloth, torn from my nether

garments, was floating and flapping like a flag of distress? And if a demonstration of sentiment was thereby rendered unseemly, no less would any assumption of dignity have met with ridicule. So I sat still, forced to decline the white hand that Rosamond extended to raise me—alas! I had thought to offer her *my* hand, not to refuse *hers!*—Forced to repose a reluctant confidence in my laughing rival; for as such I now looked on Sir Charles. Forced to resign the sweet hope, which *ignis-fatuus*-like, had lured me into that slough of loss and danger, and to watch the anxious gaze turn to a suppressed merriment, as partly suspicious of the truth, the young lady glided swiftly away to rejoin her party, followed by Sir Charles with a promise of speedy relief in the form of a top coat—for a broiling day in June! — and leaving me still seated.

Oh! Mrs. Hartopp, you are avenged! what was the loss of your back hair to *this?*

## CHAPTER X.

### RUM-TI-IDDITY.

"He either fears his fate too much
Or his deserts are small,
Who will not put it to the touch
To win, or lose it all."

If there is one quality on which I may pride myself, it is on an unflinching resolution, when once I have made up my mind. It is the conviction that my resolution is unalterable, that makes me so very slow and cautious in forming it—so much so, in fact, that I have scarcely made up my mind on some points—more than once or twice in my life!

However, I *had* come to the determination to ask Rosamond Gilroyd to be Mrs. Guy Crofton, and was sitting pensively revolving in my mind the advantages of a spoken over a written offer, a few days after the Lingford flower show. I wanted the affair settled before Wentworth's return from Northwych. Not that I had any dread of him as a rival. If I had any fears at all respecting him, they were of that sly, sarcastic laugh, with which he was used to taunt my indecision; or as he called it, my inconstancy; a laugh which really might have conveyed the impression that I had no chance with a girl, though I made up my mind to ask her!

I *did* feel that I should like to prove to him that he was mistaken there. Nor did I like the way Sir Charles was going on. It was unfair to Rosamond, for with all her good sense, the girl had her woman's

share of vanity, and the hope—however fallacious—of securing such a prize in the matrimonial lottery, might well induce her to turn coldly from the position I could offer her, though it was far enough above that which she could have aspired to, a few months ago.

I was musing thus when Cotgrave's trap suddenly dashed up to my door, and before I had quite decided whether he deserved as cordial a reception as I had been used to give him, he hurried into the room.

"I'm glad I've caught you, Crofton, old boy! I'm off to Paris to-morrow morning, and I wouldn't go without bidding you good-bye, and—and wishing you joy, you know, and all that."

"To Paris? why all our little world is whisking off to Paris! What are you going to do there, Sir Charles?"

"Well, I don't know," answered my

friend, looking rather sheepish; "my mother-in-law is going, and she wishes me to go with her, and take Charlie."

"Is Lady Janet off so soon?—and I suppose Miss Gilroyd goes with her?" I said, with as much indifference as I could assume; but the Baronet was too pre-occupied to notice the constraint of my manner.

"Why, no," he replied, "Miss Gilroyd doesn't go; she has resigned her situation. Miss Danvers is taking her place, until it can be permanently supplied."

"Indeed! and where is Miss Gilroyd going, then?"

"She has gone to the Vicarage. Miss Barham has invited her there, until—confound it all, Doctor! you know better than I do what Miss Gilroyd's plans are!—it's too bad of you to play a fellow off in this sly way."

I broke out, warmly—

"And I'll tell you what, Sir Charles—if it is as I suspect, it is unfair and unmanly in you to take advantage of a girl's friendlessness to offer her attentions which have displeased her patroness, and deprived her of her situation—if not of her reputation. Such attentions expose a woman to calumny—and to be the cause of calumny to a woman is dishonour to a man."

"What the deuce—?" cried my companion, staring at me—"what are you flying at me for? What can a fellow do more than ask a girl to marry him? and if she refuses him, he is not bound, I suppose, to publish that gratifying fact to all his acquaintance?"

I almost leapt in my chair.

"You have proposed—*honourably*—to Miss Gilroyd?"

"Did you think I would propose *dis*honourably to any modest girl, Dr. Guy? I am not such a blackguard as that—and,

by Jove! the man who would do so to Rosamond would be more bold than wise, I take it."

"And she has refused you?"

"You know she has!" returned the rejected suitor, peevishly.

"I? how should *I* know? My dear friend, do tell me all about it."

Sir Charles drew out his whiskers to their full length, and answered, meditatively—

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you, since I've told you so much; and you're a good fellow, Crofton—you won't crow over a man for his bad luck, and I don't grudge *you* your success."

"My success?—for heaven's sake don't talk in enigmas!" I cried, breathlessly—I was as excited as a lad of twenty-five—"do out with it!"

"Well, you know I always admired Miss Gilroyd, before Monica Graysbrooke made

a fool of me. I do believe Monica only set her cap at me because she thought it fun to cut out the other girl. But it was quite innocent admiration—I meant no harm."

"No, no—I'm sure of that. Well?"

"Well, when Miss Graysbrooke was so cool, I certainly *did* try a little flirtation with Rosamond—just to pique the heiress into good behaviour, you know; and really, just at first, she didn't seem to object much. But *she* cooled too, all of a sudden when Monica went away,—and then Lady Janet was down on me. Some busy-body had told her I was getting the young lady talked about; and, what with her bullying, and Rosamond's coldness, I was provoked into going further, and then my mother-in-law and I had a regular row. I told her, as civilly as I could, that I had a right to choose a wife for myself—it couldn't hurt Charlie, you know—and that if Miss Gilroyd was talked of through me, I

would behave to her like a man of honour."

Here he stopped, and having pulled out his whiskers to their extreme length, proceeded to stuff them into his mouth, as if with the design of forcibly stifling the coming revelation.

"Do go on, my good fellow—when was this?"

"The day of the flower show—the day you split your—"

"Never mind!—you were saying—?"

"And Lady Janet got, all of a sudden, as cool as a cucumber, and laughed in my face, telling me that she did not like to betray confidence, but that she must save me from making a fool of myself—that Rosamond would certainly refuse me, for that she was as good as engaged to *you*."

"And you did not believe her?"

"Believe her?—not likely! Why Miss

Gilroyd is young enough to be your daughter!"

"And pray," I asked, resentfully, "is it not common enough for a girl to overlook a few years' seniority in the man she fancies?"

"So it seems—for I rushed off to Rosamond, proposed to her, and she refused me point blank—as haughtily as if I had offered her an insult, instead of a compliment. She intimated that her hand was only asked to bind up the wounds that Monica had inflicted on my self-love, and she advised me to return to my first allegiance."

"But where was *I* in all this?"

"Why, I was annoyed at her manner, and I taxed her at once with the fault she accused *me* of; I said, 'If my mother's information is authentic, you have not dealt fairly with *me*, in even suffering my attentions.' She said, 'What has Lady Janet

told you?—I insist on knowing.' 'She says that your affections have long been secretly engaged to the Doctor.' Lord, how scarlet she blushed! I felt ashamed of myself, and sorry for her; but as I'd gone so far, I thought I'd have the matter settled—once for all—so I pressed her further, 'Is it true, Rosamond—do you love him—I don't ask, will you marry him—but, do you *love* him?' She said nothing—she needed to say nothing, with that cheek—those eyes! Ah, well, Dr. Crofton, I congratulate you with all my heart. You will make her a kind husband, I am sure, and there'd have been a jolly row if *I* had married her! But there's *no* accounting for tastes," added the Baronet, reflectively.

The implied incivility of this assertion—truism though it was—might have provoked a sharp rejoinder—but I could afford to forgive the petulance of a disappointed rival.

The news was almost too good to be true!

I had never doubted my power to please, and had had little fear but that I might win Rosamond's hand at once, and—ultimately—her heart; but I was unprepared for the astounding intelligence that the sweet girl had given that priceless treasure in payment for a few silent glances—however expressive—for a few caressing words and tones, however lovingly modulated.

Didn't that prove how careful a man ought to be in tampering with so exquisite a sensibility?

However, the harvest, if early, is ripe! let me haste to reap it. No dallying, now!

Lady Janet, her son-in-law assured me, had parted with the young lady on affectionate terms the evening before, and she had gone on a visit to Miss Barham, until another home could be provided for her.

"Of course," said the rejected, with a grim laugh, "we know where that home will be, Dr. Guy; and my mother thought that as *I* was to be her travelling companion, it would be unpleasant for all parties that Miss Gilroyd should remain with her any longer."

Yes, indeed, her future home was not far to seek, and I was eager to fly to her and offer it—though I wished that at that supreme moment she had been any one's guest but Annie Barham's.

At length Sir Charles took his departure, quite refreshed by having unbosomed himself, and really looking—or pretending to look—as if on the whole he was glad to be well out of the scrape.

He turned as he got into the trap, to say—

"Oh, by-the-bye, is Wentworth in? I have a message for him from Lady Janet, about Charlie."

"Wentworth is at Northwych, and won't be home until to-morrow night."

"He came back by this morning's train, three hours ago. I saw him at the station, but he was off like a shot before I could get at him."

"Then he hasn't come in yet. I never saw such a fellow! he is gone away to visit some bedridden old woman before changing his travelling dress. Leave the message with me."

"Oh, it's of no consequence—I've forgotten it, besides. Lady Janet will send a note. By-bye, Doctor."

I scarcely waited to see the last of him before I rushed up-stairs, to give myself a few embellishing touches, before putting my fate to the touch, as the old Poet advises.

The Baronet's disclosure had raised my courage and my spirits to a pitch of almost boyish elation.

I all but skipped about the room, as I proceeded to arrange my toilet as becomingly as possible.

She loves the doctor, does she?—the darling! and doesn't the doctor love her, that's all! And what a proof of love she has given! To refuse, for my sake, a good-looking young fellow like Cotgrave, with a fortune, and a title to boot!

Aha! these young puppies fancy they can carry all before them with the girls!—they find out the difference when an experienced veteran takes the field against them.

Rum-ti-iddity, rum-ti—what a brute of a glass!—it *magnifies* crows' feet. Rum-ti-iddity—

Hola! Guy Crofton, my lad, those hairs are wanted to cover that unlucky bald spot; it's wonderful how young men become bald in these days. I wish some new D'Orsay would arise, and bring in

the fashion of chignons for gentlemen! I've a good mind to borrow Mrs. Hartopp's!

Soh! I don't see that there is anything now to be done in the decorative department—and really I do not see that I am greatly altered since the day, twenty-five years ago, when I stood in this very chamber, and looked in this very glass, and thought I would ask Annie, before she left Cleobury, to stay and share my slender fortunes, but hesitated, faltered, and let her go, without the spoken vow that would have sealed her mine.

Dear me! by this time our eldest son would have been nearly as old as Roland Wentworth!

Bother! my spirits have effervesced away, and here is the cold fit coming on—the cowardice that always made me swerve, just as I neared the winning post, so that now, in my fiftieth spring it is a novel

situation for me, to be setting forth to make a lady a *bona fide* offer—

"To sigh and feel no pain,
To weep, and scarce know why,
To sport awhile with Beauty's chain,
Then fling it idly by—"

I am used to all that, except the weeping part, but to rivet the chain by one end to my own neck, and the other to a wedding ring, that alters the case completely.

I turned pensively from the glass, and stumped down stairs, feeling that the step I was about to take was not quite suited to the lively accompaniment of "Rum-ti-iddity."

## CHAPTER XI.

### A STRAY HAIR.

"Oh, come ye in peace, then, or come ye in war?
Or to dance at our bridal, young Lord Lochinvar?"

LITTLE did I think, twenty-five years ago, that I should ever enter a house where Annie Barham was mistress, to lay my heart and my fortune at another woman's feet!

Certainly, I should not have thought of Rosamond as that woman, for the simple reason that she was not born, then.

There must be something, after all, in the poet's prate, about the freshness of youthful feeling—for in all the excitement

of gratified vanity, the pride of promised triumph, with which I set forth to claim a bride more beautiful than Annie had ever been, I missed the charm of that earlier wooing.

One smile of Annie's, in those far-off years, had stirred my blood to a quicker pulsation than Rosamond's yielded embrace could do to-day.

Nay, even the excitement awakened by Sir Charles's conversation was passing off, already.

Before I reached the Rectory I found my thoughts wandering from Miss Gilroyd's fascinations, to dwell on the starved appearance of a skeleton donkey that passed me—no, it couldn't—I passed it—in the lane that led to the Rectory orchard.

When I used to steal out, in the hope of meeting Annie there, should I have noticed the skinniest donkey, though it had been hanging like an apple from a tree?

Let me congratulate myself that boyish ardour is merged in manlier self-possession. Surely it is a good exchange, though somehow, I do not rejoice as I might do, in the reflection that I can go to win a young and blooming bride, with nearly as much composure as if I was going to buy a cow.

If the love light is not quenched, it has lost its prismatic brilliancy.

"Nothing can bring back the hour
Of glory in the grass, of radiance in the flower."

Come, come, this will never do—that treacherous jade, Memory, is at her usual tricks, trying to silence, with her dreary monotone, the merry song of her rival, Hope.

Ah me! the *soul's* eyes, like the body's, grow far-sighted, and see all things more clearly in the distance of the Past.

The door of the Rectory was opened to me by a little page, who had been recently

drafted from Annie's schools, and who seemed deeply impressed with the responsibilities assumed with a jacket with metal buttons, and trousers with braid down the legs.

His mistress, he said, was at the school, —I knew that—I had chosen that time to call—but Miss Gilroyd was in the drawing-room; and then he faltered and blushed, as if he had made an unauthorised admission.

I administered to him a mineral tonic to brace his nerves, in the shape of a silver sixpence — an external application which was attended with marked success.

My own nerves wanted some stimulant, for now that my "Insect Queen" seemed on the point of being captured, I, the "young pursuer," felt my limbs grow suddenly shaky, and could assent to the truth of Tom Hood's assertion that

"Wedlock's a very awful thing,
'Tis something like that feat in the ring,
Requiring nerve to do it,
When one of a grand equestrian troop
Makes a jump through a gilded hoop,
Not knowing at all
What may befall
After his getting through it."

The "pretty page" forgot the ceremony of announcing me, in his joyful contemplation of the coin, and as I went to the drawing-room, I lingered a second with my hand on the door handle.

In that second, I heard the rustle of a muslin dress, and caught sight of it as I entered, fleetly vanishing through the conservatory into the garden beyond—and I stood alone in the Rectory drawing-room, face to face with—My Assistant!

*Que diable faisait il dans cette galère?*

Again a queer misgiving came over me, and I felt—I didn't know why—awkward and foolish—though it was *he* who ought

to have felt foolish—spinning his thumbs in a lady's boudoir, when he ought to have been—as I had believed he was—attending to our patients.

But I am bound to admit that Mr. Roland Wentworth did not look in the least foolish.

He stood — English fashion — on the hearth-rug, with his back to the grate-paper, and fronted me with an air of calm enquiry that made me feel as if *I* was the intruder.

He was dressed in deep mourning, which his eyes did not match, for the gleam in *them* did not speak of sorrow.

Quiet as was his attitude, his whole form and features seemed a-glow with suppressed emotion—like the landscape on a summer night, when the sheet-lightning pulses over it.

I shook hands with him—said I was glad to see him home again, (I never told a

bigger "taradiddle,") enquired how he had left Mr. Hollys, and after a few more such common-places, we both "dropped into silence."

Then I looked round—half-hoping to see Rosamond re-enter, half-hoping that it was not *she* who had flitted away as I came in, but only the housemaid, with the coal-scuttle.

But when I would have named her, my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth, and the silence remained unbroken.

Soon my keenness of observation came back to me, and I noticed, with interest, that Miss Gilroyd's work-box stood open on a table near the sofa—she had been there recently, then. But the table had been pushed away to make room for a chair, which had been drawn very near the sofa—*she* couldn't have sat on sofa and chair at once!—and—by Jove! the sofa-cushion was crushed and dinted, as though

some face had been buried in it; and whoever sat in that chair must have leaned very close over the cushion, with that hidden face upon it.

I glanced back at Roland.

He stood quiet and motionless, as stiff and rigid as if he had never sat down in his life, and never intended to do so, but I saw that his eyes followed mine, and the still gleam in them became a dancing light.

At length I spoke:

"Is Miss Barham out?"

"She is gone to the school to practise," he answered, in as solemn a tone as if he had said "She is gone to the church-yard to be buried."

A pause, then another "spurt."

"Is Miss Gilroyd gone too?"

"Miss Gilroyd was here just now; she will be here again, I think, presently."

Another hush. Roland's eyes gazed fixedly over my head, staring into space. My eyes turned to his black cloth waistcoat, and remained rivetted thereon. I was not examining the pattern of Mr. Wentworth's vest, nor counting the buttons upon it, nor admiring the broad breast it covered; no, my attention was attracted by a significant object, of which he was himself totally unconscious.

In the third button of that double-breasted waistcoat, was inextricably entwined—a hair! a woman's hair, certainly, from its length, which I marked, as it glistened and undulated in the light. A long, shining, raven black hair, twisted in the button of that waistcoat, as if a sudden movement had detached it from the native head. Whereabouts could that head have been?

Suddenly Mr. Wentworth's features

brightened, as a light footfall traversed the conservatory, and a graceful figure emerged from among the blossoms into the room.

She came up to me, with her stately and dignified repose of manner, and answered my constrained greeting with her usual calmness. But the warmth that tinged her pure cheek was holy, like the sunrise that crimsons the marble of some cathedral shrine—there was a light far beyond triumph in her glorious eyes, as she turned them from me—to my Assistant!

Silently—without a word—he passed his arm round her waist, and drew her closely to his side, and silently, without a word, I took up my hat, and quitted the chamber, feeling as if I had been kicked out of it.

I paced slowly down the shrubbery walk, bordered with a line of scarlet

geraniums, edged with grey cerastium, like the fires of youthful passion smouldering beneath the hoar hairs of old age. I have hated that floral bordering ever since.

I went out into the green lane skirting the orchard, where I used to help Annie to gather apples. The orchard was yet fragrant with blossoms; ah, where was the garnered fruitage of those vanished years? Pshaw! of course I am speaking metaphorically—the apples of twenty-five years ago would be more than shrivelled now.

In the orchard Annie's pony, a marvel of equine rotundity, was grazing in a careless, indolent fashion, like a gorged epicure over his dessert, and the lean donkey I had noticed on my way to the Rectory stood hanging his lantern jaws over the gate, watching every mouthful,

as it were with tears in his hungry eyes.

So I did as Annie would have done had she been there, I opened the gate and let the famished brute in, to the unconcealed disgust of the corpulent pony, who laid back his ears, and made at him with a vicious squeal, whereat the "moke" abjectly retreated.

Aye, go thy way, thou art not the only ass in company who could not make good his footing in the Fool's Paradise, to which he was momentarily admitted!

Here a hand was laid on my shoulder, and a blithe voice cried in my ear:

"Turn again, Whittington! why what kind of a fellow are you, to rush out of a lady's presence without bidding her farewell? Rosamond has sent me after you, to bring you back."

"Go to the devil!" was my reply, as I angrily shook off the too familiar hand.

"O, fie! Dr. Crofton, what naughty words are these? I come to bring you to an angel, and you desire me to go to—in a quite opposite direction."

Then, as without reply, I continued to walk sullenly homeward, he linked his arm in mine, and dropping the playfulness of his tone, said earnestly:

"My true, kind friend, you have been so helpful and sympathising with me in sorrow, will you not rejoice with me that one trial—a long and bitter one—has ended for me to-day?"

"You call me your true friend, Mr. Wentworth—has your conduct to me been either friendly or true?"

"Peccavi!" he cried, "yet if you will hear my plea, you will grant that my sin has extenuating circumstances."

I am a good-natured fellow in the main, and cannot bear malice—"furor brevis" is "brevissimus" with me. Besides, it is uncomfortable to sulk.

My Assistant saw me softening, and smiled.

"You are angry with me for my reticence, Doctor? You must make some allowance for habitual reserve; but you should have had my fullest confidence this evening. I could not tell you sooner what until this morning I did not know myself."

"Aye, aye, that alters the case materially—how is that, Roland?"

"Do you remember warning me once that if I was not reconciled to Miss Gilroyd, I should repent when too late?"

"I recollect something of the kind," I answered, feeling a little sheepish again.

"And do you recollect my reply?"

"Something to the effect that a prize that could be disputed, would be no prize to you."

"You knew, Dr. Crofton, you must have known, that Rosamond is, and has always been 'the world's one woman' to me."

"Not I, indeed—if you had shown to all other women the coldness with which you treated *her*, you would have been taken for a misogynist."

"What could I do, with that dear sufferer dependent on me? I had nothing before me but long years of toil, and a life which to a girl so delicately nurtured as Rosamond would have been privation. In our prosperous days, I had thought she was not indifferent to me, though we parted, as you know, in anger; and when we met again, in such altered circumstances, I dared not trust myself to renew;

even distantly, an intimacy which would have morally enervated *me*, and could have had no good result for *her*."

"I differ from you there; the assurance of your affection would have been a solace to Rosamond, and, to a girl in her position, and with her beauty, an acknowledged engagement to a respectable man—however protracted—would have been a great protection."

"Have you often seen good results from a long, an indefinitely prolonged, engagement, Dr. Crofton? Have you not seen scores of women who contracted such ties in the bloom of sanguine youth, drooping and pining under the slow wearing irritation of heart and nerves, till,—beauty faded, hopefulness crushed, health and spirits irretrievably injured,—the victim, whether a patient sufferer, or a peevish, fretful invalid, is alike unfitted to be the cheerful companion in a husband's home, or the mother of

healthy children? To a trial so bitter, so cruel, no honourable man will ever wilfully expose the woman he unselfishly loves. Surely you might have guessed this, in spite of the reserve which has offended you."

"Perhaps I did guess it; still, Roland, for some weeks past, you have known that you were certain eventually to be my partner and successor. If the prospect was not a very brilliant one, it was sufficient to warrant you in hoping that your engagement need not be indefinitely protracted."

"True; but when you gave me that hope—"

"Come, no half confidence, when I gave you that hope—?"

"I had, or thought I had, reason to believe that Rosamond was not untouched by the admiration she had awakened in some who could offer her far more worldly

advantages than I ever could. I did not think she would be won through her affections, but I feared she might yield through vanity. The woman who could sell herself for mere wealth and position, would never have had a regret of mine. This was partly why I would not give you the confidence you asked, Dr. Guy, when we were on our way to my poor sister's death-bed. I could not speak of my love for any lady until I had first avowed it to herself."

"You lost no time in doing that when you *had* made up your mind; and pray how were your scruples satisfied as to Miss Gilroyd's fidelity to this *unavowed* attachment?"

He laughed—

"I don't think I ought to tell you that."

"Then you must be content to be under a suspicion of something almost like duplicity."

"Well, I returned to Cleobury, resolving to satisfy these scruples in my own way, by asking Rosamond to choose between her titled admirer and my humble self."

"I am heartily glad of that! now, Roland, I can shake hands with you, and give you joy. I was afraid you were all the while standing aside to watch that poor girl striving against temptation you would have scorned her for yielding to, though you would not aid her in resisting it. No man has a right to do that. And so Rosamond told you she had refused our friend?"

"No, it was Miss Barham who told me. On getting out at the station this morning, there was a note from her awaiting me, in which she informed me that Miss Gilroyd had been courteously dismissed by her ladyship, and was at the Rectory, until she could find another home; and, lest I should

be annoyed by some false and foolish report, she told me the state of the case, as Rosamond had confessed it. Of course, a natural impulse made me hasten to Rosamond's side, to offer her a home—humble, it may be, for some years to come, but one which mutual love and trust will render happy. And now, Doctor, I have made full and free confession—and you have forgiven me—will you come back with me, and let me present you to my promised bride?"

"Go back," indeed! — to be dragged back, in chains, as it were, to make sport for those two young Philistines? Not if I know it!

Wentworth had made no allusion to my past menaces of rivalry; but he was not likely to have forgotten them.

I could see, in imagination, the arch glances the pair would exchange behind my back, when, with feigned *empressement*,

I paid my compliments to the bride elect.

And then my awkward constraint at meeting Roland at the Rectory—and my still more awkward flight. But for that false step, the rest might be explained and laughed off.

Suddenly a bright inspiration flashed on my brain, and I acted upon it on the instant—

"No, no, Wentworth, my dear fellow," I said, in the most *dégagé* fashion I could assume, "I will not go to the Rectory again to-day. One confidence deserves another, and I will admit to you that your presence there this morning was totally unexpected, and *did* put me out, most confoundedly!"

"Indeed, Dr. Crofton?" and Roland turned aside to hide a smothered laugh, of which I pretended to be quite unobservant.

"Yes, it did, indeed; the truth is—what odd coincidences one meets with sometimes! —I have been, like you, waiting a long time till I could offer to the lady of my love a position I thought worthy of her—for," (I added, spitefully), "a practising surgeon's wife has a sad time of it! But now—my prospects having changed so advantageously—I went up to the Rectory, hoping to find there—not *you*, certainly —but my old love, Annie Barham—alone!"

This innocent and ingenious fiction I delivered with the utmost glibness, and I chuckled with inward glee to watch the astonishment that overspread my listener's countenance. But it was astonishment unmingled with incredulity.

And what do you think were the first words the animal uttered?—

"Miss Barham? Dr. Guy!—do you really believe she'll have you?"

"I am not such a puppy as to assert that she will," I answered, loftily; "but I am yet vain enough to *hope*—though my hope may rest on no better grounds than are afforded by my *daily* experience that women constantly accept men who are immeasurably their inferiors."

"Quite true," said Roland, simply.—(What a bear he is! what an unbearable bear!)—"But I fancied you had long given up all idea of marriage, as connected with Miss Barham—"

"And *I* fancied you had long given up all idea of marriage as connected with Miss Gilroyd—and both our fancies were mistaken. However, of course, you understand, that, until affairs are in a more advanced state, this is a secret between ourselves."

"Of course," he assented. "Well, Dr. Crofton, you have my best wishes; the world will certainly agree that your choice

is, in most respects, a very wise one—but it seems a pity you've lost so much time about it!"

## CHAPTER XII.

### NEWS IN "GALIGNANI."

"I'll take the showers as they fall,
I will not vex my bosom;
Enough if at the end of all,
A little garden blossom."

TENNYSON.

STRANGE to say, it did not occur to me until some hours later, that when I made that mendacious statement to my Assistant, I had at all committed myself to the course of action I feigned to have intended. But, on reflection, it dawned upon me that I had left myself no alternative between proposing for Miss Barham in very truth, or submitting to the inference that she had rejected me.

And, on further reflection, I did not see that I could do much better than return to the love of my youth; and on further reflection yet, I felt persuaded that, in fact, my *heart* had never really strayed from her, though my *fancy* had sometimes been lured aside by such a will-o'-the-wisp as danced in the mischievous eyes of Monica, or by the serener ray in Rosamond's luminous orbs.

Bah! I never actually proposed to either of them.

I hate that word "propose." I seem always proposing to propose, or proposing to retract my proposed proposal. It reminds me of the nursery rhyme—

"Peter Piper picked a peck of pepper."

However, Annie cannot tax me with infidelity to her, since I give only to *her* the right to say "Yes," and—praise to Providence!—no other lady has had the opportunity of saying "No."

True, I had gone to the Rectory intending to give that opportunity to Miss Gilroyd; but then I had been misled as to her feeling for me by that old goose, Lady Janet, and her addle-headed son-in-law; had their information been correct, no other course was open to me, as a man of honour.

Still, had I not all the while yearned towards my early love?—Towards her, who had waited silently all these years—who had rejected an Indian General for my sake—he was only a Captain then, but that makes no difference—who had submitted for love of me, to be called an old maid—wearing, for my sake, this direst reproach of womanhood, in which "the special crown of virginity" becomes a barren coronal of thorns, even as I for *her* sake (at least, I'll tell her so) have borne the milder odium of old bachelorhood.

How soothing it was to my wounded

vanity, to anticipate the happy throb with which that pure and faithful heart would receive its long-delayed reward!

"A perfect woman," Roland called her once. Only a perfect woman should be the mistress of Rosebank. *I* should not have gone through the wood to choose the crooked stick at last! I'm sure Rosamond is not perfect—she wavered, let Roland say what he will; and I think she's got "a temper;"—and Monica is a heartless little jilt—such girls as those would always be wanting amusement to keep them out of mischief. What with concerts, balls, theatres, a gay young wife would be more trying than the night-bell—why, with her late hours, she would *be* a night-belle!

There! I couldn't laugh so, if the hurt was more than skin-deep—the world will say, Guy Crofton has made a wise choice; it is something to have the world's approval, especially when it confirms the approval of

one's own conscience — and — here I fell asleep.

However, I did not, as the Americans say, "feel like" going to the Rectory the next day.

There was no particular hurry—I had kept Annie waiting a quarter of a century —a few days more could make no difference.

But this time it was Annie's turn to make *me* wait, for a letter arrived that week, saying that her brother, the Rector, with his sick wife, was on his way to England, and requesting her to secure comfortable apartments for them in town, as the lady was to remain for some weeks in the care of her London physician, before she returned from Cleobury.

So Annie, always willing and serviceable, started off to London, carrying Miss Gilroyd with her, to Roland's intense dis-

gust, for the girl could not be left alone at the Rectory.

They were absent two whole months, during which time Mr. Wentworth was about as disagreeable a companion as a man could well be, and Cleobury itself was nothing short of hateful.

Not a soul at the Rectory, except the Hartopps, who were worse than nobody—not a being at the Cedars—not a creature at Heath Hill—"Dull as ditchwater?" no ditchwater was ever so dull, or no tadpole could live in it!

Considering that there is nothing like work for consoling a man in the absence of his beloved, I disinterestedly left all the work to my future partner and successor, while I employed myself in superintending the repairs and alterations at Rosebank, which were now being carried on in earnest.

I was particularly interested in the

arrangement of the garden and conservatory—Dear Annie was always so fond of flowers!—and in the erection of a sweetly pretty ornamental dove-cote, which I stocked, by way of delicate surprise, with some choice fan-tails, and pouters, and "carriers."

"I have found out a gift for my love,
I have found where the wood-pigeons breed."

I hope the cats won't make the same discovery, or my pigeons will be *missed* carriers!

But that hideous grotto of Monica's I threw into the water, and that ghastly silver birch that Rosamond planted, well, I couldn't well root it up—that might have been commented upon, so I chopped off its head, and made a pollard of it—that being, in my opinion, the most *cutting* insult that can be offered to any tree.

And then I sat down with my back to it, to gaze at my pretty home, and think how much prettier and more home-like it would look, when graced with the gentle presence of my first and only love.

For, by this time, I had fully persuaded myself that I never had seriously thought of any other but Annie.

Some temporary aberration of constancy is permitted to the nobler sex, but the proof of my fidelity is—that the Bride of Rosebank will be no other than "the Light of other Days," softened, not eclipsed, and fitter to glow on a quiet hearth, than to blaze in garish chandeliers.

To Annie—gentle Annie, Guy Crofton will never be an "old Guy," memory will keep our love ever fresh and fragrant; *she* will never reproach me with those few hairs at the back of my head, brushed the wrong end upwards! *she* will never need

to be reminded that at *our* age it is desirable to keep garments well aired, and have meals with rigid punctuality.

And yet Annie is not old—she is just at the right age for a—middle-aged—man's wife.

She has not, I am sure, outlived the sweet feminine sensibility to caressing words and looks, with which an affectionate husband beguiles his "hours of ease," though she no longer, like a silly girl of eighteen, thinks it bliss to be made love to on a frosty night, with the window open, or on a damp garden seat, with her feet (and her lover's) in a puddle, totally incredulous of rheumatism or catarrh.

While I was thus ruminating and thinking that it was nearly time for the Rector and his family to return to Cleobury, I perceived my Assistant—my partner now—coming eagerly towards me, with such a mirthful expression on his face as I had

not seen there since he parted with Miss Gilroyd at the station, two months, nearly, ago.

"News, Crofton!" he shouted, "capital news! guess."

"You look very jolly over it—are the ladies come back?"

"Not yet—I wish they were; but they are coming on Tuesday—that is, Miss Barham and Miss Gilroyd are coming; the Rector and Mrs. Barham will follow in a week. But that is not my news—come, guess!"

"Not I, you have told me all in which I am likely to feel any interest."

"Indeed? I think I shall arouse some languid interest in the intelligence that Sir Charles and Miss Graysbrooke have met at Biarritz, have made up their quarrel, and were married, to save time, I suppose, at the Embassy, at Naples; see, Rosamond has sent *Galignani*, and the

*Court Journal*—here it is—Marriage in High Life."

"Bless my soul!—I *am* astonished! the Baronet has taken time and opportunity by the forelock, it seems. It must be a satisfaction to you, Roland," (I added, maliciously) "to find that you made no such deep impression on the little girl's fancy, as her father feared you had."

"*I* never thought I had," he laughed, "but, Doctor, let bygones be bygones for all our sakes; the bridal pair, Rosamond writes me, will be coming back to Cleobury in the autumn, and we shall have grand nuptial festivities at Heath Hill!"

"And will Sir Charles's be the only nuptial rejoicings at that season?"

"Rosamond says nothing on that head," smiled her lover, "but, Dr. Crofton, you are getting on famously with your alterations and improvements here—you will be

able to give your housewarming when the bride comes home."

"Yes, I hope to do so," said I, significantly, "when the bride comes home."

"What! still harping on that string? I thought you had again postponed the realisation of that idea to a more convenient season."

"Then you thought wrong," I rejoined, snappishly, "others can cherish such an idea as faithfully as you, and though greater changes—

"As the sunflower turns to her god, when he sets,
The same look that she gave when he rose."

"Who *is* the sunflower, Dr. Guy? which is the lion, and which is the dogs?—bless me! what have you done to that birch?—I never saw anything more hideous!"

"Why," I explained, in some confusion, "I have merely trimmed it, because, in fact, it kept out the view!"

"Oh ah, I understand!" scoffed the aggravating puppy, "of the rising sun, I suppose, from the rotatory sunflower!"

## CHAPTER XIII.

### "JE REVIENS—"

"On revient toujours,
A ses premiers amours."

ANNIE and Rosamond came home. Wentworth was on his professional rounds when they arrived, and I had the pleasure of meeting them at the station.

Miss Gilroyd looked charming; that old hauteur of hers had given way to a womanly grace and softness that were irresistibly fascinating, and there was a healthy bloom on her cheek, a modest vivacity in her air and gestures that made her look almost as girlish as Monica.

Still, Annie—my Annie, would have lost nothing by contrast with the freshest maidens that ever danced round a may-pole.

Not *theirs* the cultivated refinement that breathes through her still delicate form—the elevation of thought on her pure brow, the tender sympathy in the calm eyes, that brightened and softened, as, on meeting mine, they had never failed to do, for years!

How I longed for the moment when those sweet eyes would gladden at the assurance of my unchanging love.

But I was forced to postpone that assurance, for the odious Mrs. Hartopp was waiting on the platform to pounce on Miss Barham with a whole budget of parish news and gossip, about school feasts and sewing classes.

When all the élite of Cleobury had

migrated, Mrs. Gaby was a triton among minnows.

So I went away, and knowing that Mrs. Hartopp would be at the Rectory all the evening, as she was not removing till the next day, I made no offer to accompany Roland, when he darted off, before he had well swallowed his dinner, to pay his devoirs to his lady love. I hope he enjoyed having Mrs. Gaby there to stare at him!

However, I made him promise to give Rosamond a hint that her presence would not be at all indispensable when I should appear, early next morning, to enquire after the health of our fair travellers, and I took care to present myself in Miss Barham's breakfast-room at an hour when I was not likely to be disturbed by other visitors.

She was alone, busied with some household work, cutting out furniture covers,

or something of that kind, for she sat on a low chair, with a lot of rustling, crackling chintz all round her.

As I entered, she looked up with a smile.

"Now, Guy, I don't flatter myself that this early visit is anxiety to see *me*. I know you are dying to hear the grand news about our friends at Heath Hill."

A faint disclaimer rose to my lips, but I checked it, for I really did want to hear the news; and perhaps, when Annie was more fluttered, she might not be in the key for telling it, besides, in talking of Sir Charles's wooing, I could not fail to find an apt occasion for introducing my own, and "a fair start is half the running."

So I listened with eager interest, while Miss Barham narrated how Sir Charles, under that sly Lady Janet's guidance, had

been brought again into the society of his volatile *quondam* "fiancée." He still smarting from the sting of Rosamond's rejection, and she (though Annie did not know *that*) likewise smarting under the sting of Roland's brusquerie.

How, there being no other likely prey at hand, she had welcomed him with all her pretty fascinations, till she had snared him once more; how Sir Charles had yielded again, and Lady Janet and Major Graysbrooke had insisted that there should be no more trifling, and so matters were hurried to a termination, and the lawyers spurred to super-legal exertions, till the reconciliation was sealed at the Embassy at Naples, before a "select circle" of intimate friends, and Monica became Lady Cotgrave before she had time to make up her mind whether she was in earnest or not.

"And I am so glad!" concluded Annie,

"for there is no harm in Monica, she is a dear affectionate little thing, all her coquettish *espiégleries* are mere girlish mischief—not selfish vanity. Sir Charles will pet her, and spoil her, and she will tyrannise over him, and they will both be as happy as the day is long."

"Is that your ideal of matrimonial felicity, Annie? over indulgence on one side, and tyranny on the other."

"Oh," she answered, carelessly, "every one has his own ideal on that subject. I speak of what I take to be Sir Charles and Monica's."

I drew my chair nearer to her, and fixed my most expressive glance on her face, that glance at which she would blush and droop her eyelids, twenty-five years ago.

"But *your* ideal, Annie? will you tell me what *that* is?"

"It's a sofa cover," she answered, simply.

I drew back in some confusion. I scarcely knew how to return to the subject gracefully, and then Annie had put a pin in her mouth, and if I said anything to agitate her, she might swallow that pin.

If there is a feminine habit that would seem to confirm the heresy that women are creatures of unreasoning impulse, it is the trick they have of putting pins in their mouths, or sticking them recklessly about their persons, in total disregard of the danger of the practice.

I have taken pins from a dead woman's œsophagus, from a living woman's breast, and after the latter operation, the hospital nurse has stood by me while I removed the bandage, and put the pin in her mouth!

I waited then, until Miss Barham had put the pin to its legitimate use. (Can

there be a greater perversion of natural uses, than for a female mouth to be made a pincushion?) They must have been wicked *women* of whom the Psalmist says: "Their lips are spears and arrows," (he meant pins, no doubt).

Then I recommenced.

"Tell me, Annie dear, what *is* your idea of a happy married life?"

"Just move your chair a little, please, Guy, you are crumpling my chintz—thanks. My ideal? oh dear, it is so long since I sketched one, that the colours are all faded from my memory, washed out, as I fear this chintz will be—there's too much green in it."

Then she drew up the crackling chintz all round her, till it stood up like a *chevaux-de-frise*, and she seemed to rattle within it, in a way that did not harmonise with the soft and tender sentiment I was trying to awake in her.

Was there a covert reproach in her last words? I thought there was, and said very lovingly:

"Let me freshen the colours of the painting, Annie, from the one which has never faded in *my* memory—let me recall your ideal of happy married life; and, oh, Annie!—ever and only dearest—let me *realise* it!"

"*What?*" said Miss Barham.

But I had made the fateful plunge, and once head over ears, I felt a strange exhilaration.

"Yes, Annie, after years of patient toil, the time has at length arrived for me to reward your constancy—I mean, for you to reward mine—now that I can offer you more than competence—a wealthy home—a—a—".

I had broken through the wall of chintz, I had caught her little white hand in mine, and was fondly pressing it to my lips.

She did not withdraw it—her face was turned away—her whole form trembled. Eagerly I bent down to look into that averted face. By Jove, she was laughing!! —Laughing!!

I recoiled, dropping her hand, as if it had been the paw of a laughing hyena, and she threw herself back in her chair, and gave free course to her merriment, until tears stood in her eyes, and she stopped from sheer exhaustion.

And then I spoke, in a tone of outraged feeling—of plaintive remonstrance:

"I should not have expected this from *you*, Miss Barham; if our old *love* be forgotten, our long friendship might have preserved me from such cruel mockery."

"Dear Guy!" she answered, penitently, "do forgive me, for worlds I would not *really* wound you; but indeed—" and the merry light that danced in her eyes seemed to threaten another outbreak—

"indeed it was so irresistibly comic to hear you—who have run the gauntlet through two generations of youthful belles —till your poor heart must be as battered as my first bonnet, coming back to lay the fruits of your long experience at the feet of a poor old maid. Oh, Guy! to *this* complexion have we come at last?"

"Ah, Annie, you are unforgiving. You reproach me with inconstancy, but if you will hear my justification—"

"I will hear no more of such nonsense," she rejoined, more gravely. "Forgive me that I laughed at you, my dear old friend, and I will forgive *you* for having made yourself so ridiculous — believe me, my wrong is the greater of the two."

"Nay, but, Annie, why should it be ridiculous in me to remember that at least you loved me *once*?"

"*I* loved you once?—are you dreaming, Guy?"

"Dreaming?—yes, it is only a dream, I suppose—a dream of happy, youthful days, when a fair girl used to walk with me under the blossoming orchard trees—smiling when I gathered the blooms for her—blushing when I whispered—"

"Goodness gracious, Guy! don't bring up the ghost of those antediluvian follies! I have no doubt that in those days I smiled and blushed when a young man flattered me, as girls of seventeen *do* blush and smile, and that you whispered all kinds of nonsense to me then—as I have seen you do to scores of girls since; but I think that, even *then*, I was not silly enough to give my love to any man who only cared to trifle with it, but did not openly ask it, or avow his own."

"But do you mean to deny that you would have given me your hand—and your heart—had I asked them?"

"I deny nothing; I daresay I should

have accepted you then, if you had asked me—but you did not; and when we met again, there was no sense of disappointment to embitter a friendship I have never ceased to value—and value none the less because there is in it no memory of girlish love."

"I do not believe you, Annie Barham; you act indifference well, and this womanly pique becomes you; but I don't believe you—I wish I could—I should be spared some self-reproach."

Miss Barham took up her chintz again, and began quietly to fit it round the leg of the sofa.

"My dear Guy, I cannot help it if the vanity, which is your constitutional failing, makes you delight in self-inflicted martyrdom. You have nothing whatever to reproach yourself with as regards *me*."

"I should rejoice to think so; I should be glad to feel that it was not my—per-

haps ill-judging—reluctance to offer you a lot scarcely worthy of you—that has made you so persistent in declining all other chances of becoming a happy wife and mother."

"Then you may rejoice, for you have nothing at all to do with it. I have declined no such chance, simply because none has ever been offered me. Oh! you ill-natured Guy! to wring from me such a humiliating admission! If I offended you by laughing at you, you have your revenge now, and we are quits."

"And what about Captain Lester, Annie?"

"Did you fancy Captain Lester was my lover?"

"The world said so."

"The world did not know that Frank Lester was attached to a dear friend and pupil of mine, whose parents would allow of no engagement while he remained in

India; but they yielded when he got promotion, and came home on leave of absence; and she was married to him, and very happy they are. She has a daughter as old as Monica Graysbrooke, nearly."

A long silence followed, broken only by the click of Annie's scissors, and the "screak" of that cursed calico.

"Then, once for all, you won't have me, Annie? You would rather be — an old maid?"

"I certainly will not have you, Guy, dear, for a husband, though I hope I shall always have you for a friend. I have been so long used to being an old maid, that I rather like it—and," she added, laughing, "I am much obliged to you for giving me the opportunity of proving that old maidhood is my deliberate choice."

I arose with a sigh, shook hands with her mournfully, but paused when I reached the door.

"Annie, say at least that you *would* have accepted me had I asked you in those May days, under the orchard trees?"

"If that is any comfort to you—yes, I should have accepted you; but *had* you asked me then, you would have been the Guy Crofton I dreamed — not the Guy Crofton I *know* you; and I should have had as good warrant for saying 'Yes,' as I have now for saying 'No.' Ah! there's Rosamond! Come in, my dear. I want Dr. Crofton to hear you sing

"'Love me little, love me long.'

You won't stop? Well, good-bye—another time, then."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### "NEVER SAY DIE."

"If Peter Piper picked the peck of pepper,
WHERE'S the peck of pepper Peter Piper picked?"
OLD NURSE.

I THOUGHT Rosebank looked horribly dull when I got home that evening. Annie's pigeons were wheeling and circling, billing and cooing round their new dove-cot. I rang the bell, and ordered my housekeeper to have a pigeon-pie made for my breakfast the next morning.

And so she did, and I quite enjoyed it.

Still, I felt dull at Rosebank. I think

my removal there was rather premature; those masons and bricklayers made such a noise early in the morning, and late in the evening they were courting the housemaids. All the world seemed courting, or being courted—while I sat solitary, and hummed the old song, set for a masculine voice—

"Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
Oh, dear, what shall I do?
There's nobody coming to marry me,
Nobody coming to woo-o-o-o!"

Annie's refusal had cut me deeper than I could have supposed possible; it had been so soothing to feel that a true heart had beat for me through all the changes from youth to middle age—and what a mortification to know that there was a woman in the world who actually preferred being an old maid to marrying *me!*

In the faint hope that her rejection might not be irrevocable, I made a few endeavours to soften her—until she threat-

ened, if I ever recurred to the subject again, that she would tell Mrs. Hartopp! upon which I desisted.

Rosamond and Wentworth behaved like angels, never giving the faintest indication that they were aware of my repulse, or retained any recollection of my matrimonial projects.

Their marriage was fixed for September, and the Rector's wife, who had now returned, with her husband, to Cleobury, kindly gave the bride elect a home at the Rectory, until she should have one of her own.

It was to have been a very quiet wedding, but, as it turned out, it was a very gay one, for Monica, hearing of it, wrote immediately, to offer to give the wedding-breakfast at Heath Hill.

It was very sly of Monica, for, of course, to do that, she must return, herself a bride, to Cleobury — and the welcome to the

Baronet's lady would at once take the wind out of the sails of the humbler wedded pair.

Little they cared for that! If Lady Cotgrave meant revenge, it was a very harmless one.

But, in the bustle of preparation for them, my spirits revived—"Richard was himself again!"

The old Major came back to the Cedars, all triumph and glee. Sir Charles had behaved nobly in the way of settlements, and the old gentleman was left in possession of a good share of his daughter's fortune, while he would be deprived of but little of her society.

He was all affability, embracing all the women, and "dear-boying" all the men, fussing about—steaming up and down like a locomotive engine—superintending decorations, rehearsing processions and addresses—drilling our awkward squad to make

speeches to the Lady of the Manor, and strew flowers on the pathway of the bride —until the long stagnant current of Cleobury life began once more to stir and sparkle into a freshened stream of animation.

The Heath Hill party arrived in the dusk of the evening; Sir Charles and Monica, Lady Janet, a whole bevy of ladies of all ages, and a troop of men, invited to the partridge-shooting.

I was afraid such a battalion of strangers would frighten Rosamond, but when I expressed this fear to my partner, he laughed.

"Why, Crofton, what has Rosamond to do with it? hers is a very subordinate place in the pageant. It is Lady Cotgrave who is *the* bride to-morrow! she has brought all her bridal finery, I am told, and all her pretty bridesmaids are with her, and it is for *her*, and not for the poor

surgeon's wife, that these floral arches are erected, and those flags flying. Read the inscriptions; 'Welcome home,' and the cyphers in the wreaths and all. Rosamond is perfectly well aware, that she is only the occasion for her friend's glorification and quite content that it should be so."

And so she seemed.

As she left the church, on her husband's arm, there was no more flutter or agitation in her manner than if she had been married every day for a week.

In her pure white dress, the veil that floated over her, the white wreath in her raven hair, in every detail of her bridal costume, there was a severe simplicity that suited well the dignified grace of her movements, the depth of thought and feeling that sat on her calm brow, and shone in her luminous eyes.

The long lane of spectators, through which she passed, suspended their noisy

greeting as they looked on her, and were silent, with the reverent awe of those who witness prayer.

But the momentary silence gave place to a burst of cheering, as Sir Charles followed with Monica.

It was as though a shooting-star had crossed the heavens, and been succeeded by a blue and red sky-rocket.

Anything so dazzling as Monica I never beheld, unless it was the fair galaxy of bridesmaids, her own as well as Rosamond's, that walked behind her.

To see how the silver ribbons glittered in her shining hair—how dimpling smiles and rosy blushes made her pretty face radiant in its child-like delight, and matronly exultation—to see the lace flounces and satin streamers, the chains and bracelets, and jewel-work, that made her *petite* figure look like a penwiper embroidered in beads!

The storm of admiration that greeted her might have made the trout leap in the brook!

Then there was another cheer for Charlie, who walked beside his pretty step-mother, solemn with interest and excitement.

Then another cheer for the bridesmaids, in which I longed to join, for eight prettier girls had not often been seen in Cleobury. A galaxy, I called them? they were a constellation—like the Pleiades "tangled in a silver braid," they wore silvery veils over their shoulders, and one girl I particularly remarked, for beneath that silvery veil glistened two soft ringlets of the purest gold I ever saw.

I gazed so intently on those ringlets, at the breakfast, that I forgot to return thanks for them—for the wearer of them, I mean—as it was my duty as "best man" to do, until Miss Barham, who sat next me, recalled me to my duty, and then fol-

lowing the direction of my eyes, she whispered, archly—

"Take care, Guy! that young lady is Miss Laura Stanhope; they say she is attached to a cousin in India—her 'pursuer' is literally in 'the emerald meadows of Kashmeer.'"

And he had better stop there, or I have no skill in reading ladies' looks—else why did the wearer of those burnished ringlets (there were only two of them) decline all invitations to waltz, and bend her blue eyes so sweetly on me, as I sat beside her, arranging her bouquet for her, while I asked her to come to Rosebank and choose her favourite flowers from Annie's conservatory that should have been? why did she look so conscious and bashful when Lady Comberhill beckoned to her, and, under pretence of tying her sash, whisper, in a tone audible to everybody near but herself,

"My dear, he has got a very pretty place, and a handsome income."

"Indian cousin? pooh! Guy Crofton, my lad, never say die! You are only a few months past your fiftieth year—before you reach your fifty-first, Rosebank may boast a golden-haired mistress, and *you* will no longer be led

"'From flower to flower,
A weary chase, and wasted hour.'"

THE END.

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